

### Servants' Pasts: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia. Vol. I

Sinha, Nitin (Ed.); Varma, Nitin (Ed.); Jha, Pankaj (Ed.)

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## Servants' Past

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# Servants' Pasts

Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia  
Vol. I

*Edited by*

NITIN SINHA, NITIN VARMA and PANKAJ JHA



Orient BlackSwan

SERVANTS' PASTS:  
SIXTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SOUTH ASIA – VOL. I

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The project was stipulated to cover the period from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. However, it was not easy to compartmentalise the history of domestic service, servitude and servants into neat brackets of historiographical periods. In choosing the above time-scale, the quest was to understand the nitty-gritty of the colonial period but we were also aware of the importance of putting this period in dialogue with what happened before, and what social, political and discursive regimes of master–servant relationship carried into the colonial period from precolonial times. This indeed pressed on us the necessity to take the early modern period very seriously in our efforts to write the history of domestic servants. Our association with Pankaj Jha grew gradually over the last three years: in the beginning from being the ‘temporal cousins’ across the divide of the modern and the early modern with similar interests in questions of social and political formations and historical changes related to social marginals to a firm friend and colleague

with whom numerous ideas were shared, discussed and rejected. We are thankful to him that he accepted our offer to become part of the editorial team for this volume.

The essays in this volume were part of the project's first conference held at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, 2017, and at the 24th European Conference on South Asian Studies, Warsaw, 2016. Unfortunately, we were not able to include all the papers that were presented but we profusely thank all the contributors who enriched our understanding of the theme, which we hope is reflected in the long introduction to the volume. We also thank colleagues, staff, and friends at CSDS, particularly Ravikant and Dipu Saran, for their keen and active participation during the conference. Those who chaired the sessions and made insightful comments also deserve our gratitude. Finally, we thank Charu Gupta from University of Delhi who took keen interest in academic as well as logistic preparations preceding the conference. Her association lessened our worries.

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direction of opening a new line of research in South Asian history in future. At the same time, we hope that this 'regional' history has engaging substance even for those who prefer to orient their research around 'global' and transnational frameworks.

– Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha



# Glossary

<i>ābdār</i>	water carrier, water-men
<i>adab</i>	normative codes of behaviour
<i>ajīr</i>	employee/servant
<i>akhlāq</i>	didactic texts on ethics
<i>ayah</i>	maid and nurse
<i>badaran</i>	chief maid/senior-most attendant
<i>bahis</i>	ledgers/accounts books
<i>bai'</i>	sale
<i>bainama</i>	sale deed
<i>banda</i>	slave
<i>bandagan</i>	plural of <i>banda</i>
<i>bandagi</i>	service
<i>banian</i>	trader, money dealer, agent
<i>baraka</i>	essence
<i>begār</i>	forced labour
<i>beldar</i>	spade-wielders
<i>bhadramahila</i>	women of rank/upper-caste-class woman
<i>bhritya</i>	servant
<i>birun</i>	external
<i>brahmani</i>	female priest
<i>chakar</i>	servant (lower grade)
<i>charamdoz</i>	leather-workers
<i>charans</i>	court poets
<i>chashnigir</i>	taster
<i>chela</i>	slave
<i>chetti</i>	personal attendant
<i>chiithi barda faroshi</i>	receipts of the sale of a slave
<i>chittiya</i>	letter
<i>chowkidar</i>	watchman



<i>compagnons</i>	trained but not independent artisans
<i>dakshina</i>	sacrificial fee
<i>dana</i>	gift
<i>darbar</i>	court
<i>darjan</i>	female tailor
<i>darogha</i>	superintendent/inspector
<i>darzi</i>	tailor
<i>dasa</i>	male servant/slave
<i>dasavargena</i>	slaves
<i>dasi</i>	female servant/slave
<i>davri</i>	female attendant/companion to rani
<i>deorhidar</i>	gatekeepers
<i>dhai maa</i>	wet nurse
<i>dhanik</i>	affluent one
<i>dholan</i>	female drummer
<i>diwan</i>	finance minister
<i>domestiques</i>	domestic servants
<i>durodgar</i>	carpenters
<i>durwan</i>	gatekeeper
<i>dvijas</i>	twice born
<i>fahishas</i>	common prostitutes
<i>farrash</i>	carpet-setters
<i>gayan</i>	singer
<i>ghilman</i>	slave boys
<i>grihasthi</i>	domesticity
<i>hawaldar</i>	police official
<i>huzuri</i>	guard
<i>inquilab</i>	revolution
<i>jagir</i>	land grant/landed estate
<i>jagirdar</i>	holder of an estate
<i>janani deorhi</i>	household space meant for females of the royal family
<i>jati</i>	caste
<i>kakini</i>	cowrie/quarter of a <i>pana</i>
<i>kammaka</i>	worker
<i>kanizak</i>	slave girl
<i>kanwaria</i>	farmer
<i>karkun</i>	clerk
<i>khaimadoz</i>	tent-repairers
<i>khansaman</i>	house steward

<i>kharach</i>	expense
<i>khass</i>	elite slaves
<i>khawas</i>	personal attendant
<i>khelivali</i>	players
<i>khidmat</i>	service
<i>khidmutgar</i>	waiter/table attendant
<i>khyats</i>	clan/court histories
<i>kutumba</i>	family
<i>laquais</i>	lackeys
<i>mali</i>	gardener
<i>mālik/āqā</i>	master
<i>mamalik</i>	eunuch
<i>mashalchi</i>	torch-bearer
<i>maskan</i>	dwelling
<i>maulazadgan</i>	sons of slaves
<i>musahib</i>	advisor
<i>mustājir</i>	employer/master
<i>naari</i>	woman
<i>naib darogha</i>	deputy darogha
<i>najars</i>	eunuchs, who were employed as palace guards
<i>naukar</i>	male servant (upper grade)
<i>naukrani</i>	female servant/maid
<i>nayan</i>	female barber
<i>niti</i>	political ethics
<i>pana</i>	80 cowries (shells)
<i>pardayat</i>	concubine
<i>pargana</i>	territorial unit comprising a group of villages
<i>paswan</i>	concubine
<i>patrani</i>	chief queen
<i>patta</i>	deed
<i>patwari</i>	accountant
<i>pergunah</i>	sub-units of a district
<i>porisa</i>	man
<i>potedar</i>	finance officer
<i>preshya</i>	servant
<i>purohit</i>	priest
<i>qāḍī, qazi</i>	judge
<i>qasba</i>	township
<i>qurchi</i>	house-guards

<i>ra'is</i>	urban notables
<i>raj badaran</i>	chief badaran
<i>rangrez</i>	dyer
<i>rani</i>	queen
<i>raniwas</i>	Ranis' residence/household
<i>ryot</i>	agricultural labourer
<i>samanta</i>	landed chief
<i>saqqa</i>	water-carriers
<i>sarraḥ</i>	money changer
<i>shaitanpura</i>	devil's abode
<i>sharbatdar</i>	drink-server
<i>shari'at</i>	Islamic law
<i>shudrachara</i>	conduct of the <i>shudras</i>
<i>shudradharma</i>	the duty of the <i>shudras</i>
<i>shudri</i>	woman of the <i>shudra</i> caste
<i>sircar</i>	accountant
<i>sufraḥi</i>	one who laid the table
<i>sunar</i>	goldsmith
<i>sunnud</i>	deed
<i>syce</i>	stable attendant/horse groom
<i>ta'rikh</i>	history
<i>tadbir</i>	human volition
<i>tajik</i>	Persian speaker
<i>talimkhana</i>	training centre
<i>talimvali</i>	trainee
<i>talivali</i>	clappers
<i>tazkiras</i>	early modern biographical compendia
<i>toshaki</i>	keeper of the wardrobe
<i>trabajadoras del hogar</i>	domestic workers
<i>tujjar</i>	merchants
<i>urdu-begis</i>	female guards
<i>waqianavis</i>	news reporter
<i>zanan-i parsā</i>	women-servants
<i>zikr/dhikr</i>	to mention, to remember

# Introduction

NITIN SINHA, NITIN VARMA AND PANKAJ JHA

## THE EVERYDAY AND ANECDOTAL: THE PAST IN THE CONTEMPORARY<sup>1</sup>

Why has domestic servants and service been a marginal theme in the histories of South Asia?<sup>2</sup> We can try to address this by looking at the ways the ‘schools’ and ‘subdisciplines’ of history writing have developed (and have prioritised certain themes and subjects over others), a point to which we will of course return, but we open our discussion by touching upon the everyday and the anecdotal. The reason being, the

<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Raffaella Sarti who read and commented on this section.

<sup>2</sup> Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Fae Dussart, “‘That Unit of Civilisation’ and ‘the Talent Peculiar to Women’: British Employers and their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22, no. 6, 2015, 706–21; Fae Dussart, “‘To Glut a Menial’s Grudge’: Domestic Servants and the Ilbert Bill Controversy of 1883”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14, no. 1, 2013; Nupur Chaudhury, ‘Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India’, *Victorian Studies* 31, no. 4, 1988, 517–35; Nupur Chaudhury, ‘Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India’, *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 4, 1994, 549–62; Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858–1900)* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2005); Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Samita Sen, ‘Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work: Domestic Work in Bengal’, SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 1, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2015; Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016). Studies done from other disciplinary, or interdisciplinary, approaches will be discussed as we go along. But one sociological study, the first of its kind, is Aban B. Mehta, *The Domestic Service Class* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1960).

marginality of servants in historical accounts stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming presence of servants and servant-keeping cultures—both in past and present. In India, the massive problem of quantification is reflected in the range of the probable number of domestic servants, between 2.5 million and 90 million.<sup>3</sup> The failure to quantify the numbers is a reflection of the challenges in defining servants in a culture where domestic service is highly pervasive and had been so in the past as well. The paradox also tells us something about the reluctance of South Asian historiography to address the question of service and servants; domestic servant is not a readily found, easily defined and politically charged category to be instantly discovered in the archives while browsing the departmental index volumes or by reading early modern manuscripts and treatises. As Bridget Hill has remarked in case of British servants, they are much written about but remain ‘enigmatic figures.’<sup>4</sup> This is also true for South Asia.

But more importantly, such a marginality productively alerts us to the conceptual and methodological challenges in writing servants’ pasts of South Asia. The burden of the present (in terms of political sensibility and domestic labour mobilisation happening globally) is not only in discovering the servant in the historical archive but also in understanding the meanings and substance of the relationships in which s/he has been embedded, that has allowed her/him to be ubiquitous yet remain invisible in the theoretical and conceptual formulations and historical accounts. This necessitated different approaches being employed in the essays in this volume which focus on *relationships* between servants and masters and more broadly between subordinates and superiors (including individuals, groups and institutions) in several guises and diverse space–time settings. But many of the essays also examine the historical production of (and challenges to) a particular *status* (social and occupational) of the servant.

<sup>3</sup> International Labour Organization, *Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2013), 14–15.

<sup>4</sup> Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domestic in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 2004), 3. Also, D. A. Kent, ‘Ubiquitous but Invisible: Female Domestic Servants in Mid-Eighteenth Century London,’ *History Workshop* 28, no. 1, 1989, 111–28.

Together, they aim to lay out a range of ways in which to approach servants' pasts.<sup>5</sup>

We encounter servants daily in our social lives. They are everywhere in the past and present of our times. They are in their masters' and employers' homes. They are in markets and streets. They have their own homes as well, about which we know very little.<sup>6</sup> The physical distance between the high-rise towers and the surrounding slums is not so great; the social gulf, nevertheless, makes an impenetrable smokescreen. There is often only one-way traffic. Servants enter and leave the houses of their masters, mistresses and employers who, at best, keep their servants' addresses (and now phone numbers) safe on a piece of paper and/or digital devices, if needed, in case of absence or theft.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The simultaneous use of 'servant' and 'domestic servant' is not a slippage on our part. It actually refers to that historical complexity wherein discovering a true and exclusive 'domestic servant' is highly difficult. We explain this complexity in the course of this introduction and the issue has also been dealt with individually in various chapters in this volume such as those of Sajjad Alam Rizvi and Pankaj Jha for the early modern period and by Nitin Sinha for the early colonial.

<sup>6</sup> To some readers, the intentional use of 'they' for servants might appear as crude, suggesting an attempt to set the servants apart in a binary of us and them, and then arrogate to 'ourselves' the privilege of writing about 'them'. This surely is neither the intention nor, hopefully, the implication of our usage. Rather, it simply flags some methodological difficulties: first, because our sources of information (especially for the pre-modern times) are invariably the accounts of the masters, it is a challenge to break out of the given narratives even as one continues to use the same source. The intricacy of this challenge may be gauged from the fact that almost all words for the household and related spaces in pre-modern languages (*kutumb*, *grihastha*, *zanana*, *deorhi*) refer to the establishments owned by the masters. The servants also had their families and presumably a household, howsoever humble those might have been. But there are no words to describe them. Power in the master-servant relationship was thus embedded in language itself. The question then is: how should a historian reflect on her/his own subject position and ensure that their narratives are not doomed to remain trapped in reproducing the master's vantage point? We will discuss the issue briefly in the second section of this introduction.

<sup>7</sup> The new technology of identification is making its way into recruitment practices. We refer not only to the increasing presence of online portals for hiring servants but also that these websites ask for *aadhar* numbers of would-be-servants. 'Aadhar' is a state-led identity programme for every citizen of India, which stores financial, physical as well as biometrical data on every person. For Orwellian shades behind this big brotherly

Servants appear fleetingly in literature. We see them in films. We notice them in photographs of their masters' and employers' families. They cook and clean and provide care and nurture. As Premchand, the famous Hindi litterateur, noted in his Hindi short story *Mahri* ('The Female Servant'), the old female servant, Budhiya Nauli, worked in the protagonist's household until her death with her humped back, caring for everyone but never asking for care in return even when ill.<sup>8</sup> Servants stand attentively behind their masters or follow them unnoticed. Gestures define the practice of obedience.<sup>9</sup> In their shadowed attendance, pretended invisibility and muted voice, they mark their presence.

They comprise Vedic *dasis* and the *bhritya* of the *Dharmashastras*, through the *ghulam* of the Sultanate period, the *kaneez* and the *launda* of the Mughal times, the *davris* of the Rajputana households, the *ayahs*, *naukars* and *chakars* of the colonial era, to the all-inclusive category of the contemporary 'servant', who together performed a range of domestic, sexual and emotional work in a variety of relationships.<sup>10</sup> How to

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drive, see K. C. Verma, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four and India's Severe Case of "Aadhaaritis"', *The Wire*, 20 January 2018, available at <https://thewire.in/society/indias-severe-case-aadhaaritis> (accessed on 18 May 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Premchand, *Mahri*. The story in Devanagari script is available at <http://gadyakosh.org/gk/महरी/प्रेमचंद> (accessed on 18 May 2018). Probably written in the 1930s, this short story recalls the older period of trust and affect that then characterised master-servant relationships. Budhiya Nauli's praise is in that context, otherwise the main thrust of the story is on the widespread prevalence of a 'servant problem', a *masterly* trope that marks generational transition almost every 30–40 years. One can detect a 'servant problem' (that can be bunched together as reflecting servants asking for higher wages, not being dependable, uncouth and prone to back answering, etc.) as early as the 1780s, 1820s, 1870s and through this story in the 1930s. Globally also, the 'servant problem' has remained a classic framework of understanding the anxieties of the master class between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. See Raffaella Sarti, 'Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work', *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314. Nitin Sinha's essay in this volume traces this in the context of late eighteenth-century Calcutta.

<sup>9</sup> Radhika Chopra, 'Servitude and Sacrifice: Masculinity and Domestic Labour', *Masculinities & Social Change* 1, no. 1, 2012, 34.

<sup>10</sup> These are the range of service relationships which have been directly explored in the essays collected in this volume as well as the subsequent one. Both these volumes are part of the European Research Council (ERC) project on domestic servants, about which more information can be found at <https://servantspasts.wordpress.com>.

understand the variety of master/mistress–servant relationships then is a crucial question for us. The focus on bigger picture through law, polity, institutions and ideologies is obviously important. The texture, meaning, practice and representation of master/mistress–servant relationship embedded in ‘small acts’ are not inconsequential either.

### Proximate Differences, Hidden Scripts

Servants mark the differences in this relationship; through their body, speech and act they in fact *become* the bearers and markers of social difference. Two social groups—one meant to serve and the other being served—come face to face in the same household. They occupy the same physical space but not in the same way. Masters and mistresses sit on the chair and sofa, servants either on their designated stool or on the floor.<sup>11</sup> Servants get old rugs and used blankets to sleep with. Sometimes, even in an empty metro train, the maid squats on the floor.<sup>12</sup> When master/mistress

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This volume covers the period of early modern to early colonial; the second volume continues the exploration from the nineteenth century to the contemporary era. The long introduction in this volume in a combined way attempts to open the field of historical investigation on the theme of servants’ pasts. The introduction to the second volume will be specific and short. Our attempt here is not only to cover some long-term temporal changes with debates in the historiography but also to think innovatively of ways, sites and frameworks that could further help future research on servants. The historical long-term engagement, focus on a variety of households, regional diversity of case studies and, not least, inclusion of both male and female domestics are few important differences between this work and another recently published book by Sen and Sengupta, *Domestic Days*. The introduction of *Domestic Days* nonetheless provides the most recent state of scholarship, particularly contemporary, on domestic workers.

<sup>11</sup> When elites and masters in the early modern period sat on their Persian rugs or elevated platforms/thrones, we can imagine (as based on visuals from those times) that servants usually stood behind them. Sitting on the floor was very common in the modern period also (and is still now). There are some visuals from the early nineteenth century showing servants standing behind their masters sitting on the floor. A change is noticeable in the late nineteenth century when we notice in portraits the increasing use of the chair, in which case servants usually stand behind their masters and mistresses or squat on the floor in front of them.

<sup>12</sup> Shekhar Gupta, ‘Even in an Empty Delhi Metro Coach, Middle-Class Indians Make their Maids Sit on the Floor’, *The Print*, 22 January 2018, available at <https://theprint.in/opinion/maid-middle-class-india-class-new-caste-even-metro-coach/30808/> (accessed



and servant sit together, the awkwardness of posture instantly reveals their identity and the asymmetry of the relationship between them.<sup>13</sup> The experience could be 'surreal' when roles and places are inverted.<sup>14</sup> At homes and in public places, the boundaries are constantly erected but also challenged.<sup>15</sup> The social identity of the master and the servant is often detectable even if not verbalised.<sup>16</sup>

Even when both consume similar things (as happens on the rarest of the rare occasions), they do it differently.<sup>17</sup> Servants drink from the cups

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on 20 May 2018); Anand Giridharadas, 'Exploring India's Prosperity Through the Eyes of the Invisible Men', *The New York Times*, 14 August 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/world/asia/15india.html> (accessed on 20 May 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Jannatul Mawa did a brilliant photo project called 'Close Distance' in which he asked mistress and maid to occupy the same frame by sitting either on the same sofa or next to each other. The effect is visually telling, which does not require any textual explanation. See <https://mawaspace.wordpress.com/projects-2/close-distance/> (accessed on 20 May 2018). Servants are usually barefooted, which is another marker of difference. In colonial times, only very higher-up servants such as *munshis* and *banians* were allowed to appear in shoes before their masters.

<sup>14</sup> Nithya Shanti, 'We Invited Our Maid's Family for a Diwali Dinner and This is What We Learnt', *The Express Tribune Blogs*, 11 November 2015, available at <https://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/30215/we-invited-our-maids-family-for-a-diwali-dinner-and-this-is-what-we-learnt/> (accessed on 20 May 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Anne Waldrop in a recent ethnography of an upper-class Delhi neighbourhood (Golf Links) notes that gating of this neighbourhood gained prominence as one of the several strategies employed by the upper-class residents to restore 'order' and control over the public access and movement of their servants and other servant-looking strangers in a situation where many of them felt that boundaries between class and castes were crumbling. Anne Waldrop, 'Gating and Class Relations: The Case of a New Delhi "Colony"', *City and Society* 16, no. 2, 2004, 93–116.

<sup>16</sup> Aakar Patel, 'The Servant in the Indian Family', *Mumbai Mirror*, 17 June 2009, available at <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other//articleshow/15932324.cms> (accessed on 20 May 2018). Sarah Lamb reminds that 'For anyone who has spent time in Indian middle-class homes, the intimate everyday relations and bodily practices (the politics of sitting, access to leisure and television, ideologies of dirt and difference, etc. — daily operations of distinction rooted in extreme inequality) are absolutely familiar and convincing, although ordinarily unarticulated and unrecognized.' Sarah Lamb, review of 'Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India, by Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum', *Contemporary Sociology* 40, no. 6, 2011, 738.

<sup>17</sup> Popular proverbs from the region of Bihar, which use food items as examples, reflect the ideas around accessibility. One proverb that explains the lament when a

whose rims are broken. They *slurp* and *gulp* their tea while their masters and mistresses *sip* it. They eat from plates that are apparently ‘unusable’ for their masters and mistresses.<sup>18</sup> The colonial ethnographer G. A. Grierson noted it as a common practice in the late nineteenth century that new earthen vessels were first used by a member of the family and not by one of the servants of the house lest they should become impure.<sup>19</sup> The euphemism of servants being ‘part of the family’ was often contradicted in such everyday practices.<sup>20</sup> Servants are often expected to eat after the family members and also ‘out of sight’. Usually, servants partake of the leftovers, although this practice seems to have considerably declined in recent times. There are various terms for expressing the amount of food put into the mouth at once. In nineteenth-century Patna, one of those terms, *newala*, also meant ‘left-overs’ kept aside for servant(s) after everyone else had eaten.<sup>21</sup> While sometimes the food itself is *classed* (two varieties of rice cooked in the household, the inferior one for the servant), quite commonly, the underlying factor is the distinction in the hierarchy between those who serve and those who are served. When servants are given something special, it apparently evokes a feeling of love and gratitude in them, so felt the old lady in Zamaruddin Ahmad’s Urdu short story *Sukhe Sawan* (‘The Dry Rains’, 1987).<sup>22</sup>

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favour is doled out to the underserving people while the deserving is left out goes like this: *kaneyan he manr nan, lokdin ke bundiya*, meaning the bride cannot get even rice gruel while her maid servant gets *bundiya* (a kind of sweet associated with special occasions). The undertone of this proverb shows that servants having *bundiya* is an aberration. John Christian, *Behar Proverbs: Classified and Arranged According to Their Subject-Matter* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1891), 146–47.

<sup>18</sup> Kathinka Frøystad in her ethnography of upper-caste homes in urban Kanpur notes that employers often justify the separation of utensils and cups by portraying their servants as essentially *ganda* (dirty). A discourse of hygiene is employed as a justification to reinscribe the distinctions and boundaries of caste. Kathinka Frøystad, ‘Master–Servant Relations and the Domestic Reproduction of Caste in Northern India’, *Ethnos* 68, no. 1, 2003, 73–94.

<sup>19</sup> George A. Grierson, *Bihar Peasant Life* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895), 134.

<sup>20</sup> Also see, Grace Esther Young, ‘The Myth of Being “Like a Daughter”’, *Latin American Perspectives* 14, no. 3, 1987, 365–80.

<sup>21</sup> Grierson, *Bihar Peasant Life*, 343.

<sup>22</sup> We have used the English translation of this story as it appeared in Muhammad Umar Memon, ed., *The Colour of Nothingness: Modern Urdu Short Stories* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–15.

But servants feeling love and gratitude for being treated in a special, kind manner could be both an imposition and imagination of what masters/mistresses think happened. Things have changed from the times when offering *jootha* (leftovers) to servants was considered commonplace.<sup>23</sup> One might not, however, feel surprised that they are still seen as the first claimants of the food which is *baasi* (non-fresh leftovers). Love and gratitude, care and affection, or the claims to all of these as part of fictive or constructed norms of kinship mask the starkness of difference in status.<sup>24</sup> The claims of servants being treated like daughters and sons, and masters and mistresses acting like parents are both real and constructed. At the same time, adding *ma* (mother) as suffix in the female servants' names, usually by the children of the master's household, reveals an affective, familial yet hierarchical relationship. The 'mask' of these kin terms is not to be quickly explained as an artificially drawn veil, instrumentally meant to keep 'things in order,' to remind servants to 'know their place.' This mask is interwoven with the structures of hierarchy, affinity and inequality as they have been historically constituted. They are not like the 'ethnographic space' of the colonial archive, as explained by Ann Laura Stoler, which 'resides in the *disjuncture* between prescription and practice, between state mandates and the maneuvers [*sic*] people made in response to them, between normative rules and how people actually lived their lives.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Particularly along caste lines, when servants happened to be from lower caste. For instance, see Premchand, *Saubhagya ke Kode* ('The Whips of Fortune'), 1924. We thank Prabhat Kumar, a contributor in our second volume, for this reference. The story in Devanagari script is available at <http://www.hindisamay.com/> (accessed on 22 May 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Recent works based on ethnography have shown this to be the case. Class as a dividing factor triumphs over other registers of relationship based upon trust, dependency, love and intimacy. See Lisa Lau, 'South Asian Mistresses and Servants: The Fault Lines between Class Chasms and Individual Intimacies,' *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 17, no. 1, 2010, pp. 33–58. Other studies based on ethnography, while accepting the class difference, have highlighted the role of caste in the reproduction of inequality between masters and servants within the household. See Frøystad, 'Master–Servant Relations.' Sara Dickey, 'Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India,' *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 2, 2000, 462–89.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 32 (emphasis added). However, we very much agree with her on the necessity of paying a proper attention to the granular consistency of the archives

We contend that the mask is part of the historical 'game' of affiliation, domination and resistance; it does not stand outside of it. It is not in the space of disjuncture but of interaction. In other words, the visible cracks of social difference through everyday practices of where to sit, how to drink and what to eat remain covered by a 'hidden script', whose language and grammar are unsurprisingly known to the master/mistress and servants. It is the power of this 'hidden script' that probably explains the contemporary conundrum that a majority of female domestics coming from the global south may not need to speak the language of the host country (an observation made by Bridget Anderson) yet the notion of work around the cycle of expectation remains clear.<sup>26</sup> What servants do behind the back is always on the mind of the masters/mistresses.<sup>27</sup> What masters and mistresses can say upfront (in the way of reproach and reprimand) is unknown to the servants but within the range of expected praise or rebuke. They interact but within the structures of asymmetries. They admit to trust each other with a wilful desire to misunderstand and suspect. Any historical account of this relationship therefore requires engagement with both: the known parameters of ideologies and institutions that shape the relationship and 'informed speculation' to understand the texture of this hidden script.

While it is possible to trace the outlines of the prescriptions for servants (and occasionally even for masters) within different temporal contexts of pre-modern times, it is more difficult to access vignettes of the everyday asymmetries in the relationship for any period other than the modern-contemporary. In this volume, a beginning in this respect has been made in the context of Ancient Pali ecumene (Uma Chakravarti), medieval Perso-Arabic literary representations (Sunil Kumar), and medieval Sanskrit and vernacular literary cultures (Pankaj Jha). While the patterns of power relations might appear comparable, even similar, the technologies of masking, softening, expressing and resisting the forms of control and

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and not to flow with the past decade's post-colonial faith-system of reading power in every grain of the colonial archive.

<sup>26</sup> Bridget Anderson, 'Servants and Slaves: Europe's Domestic Workers', *Race & Class* 39, no. 1, 1997, 37–49.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Hamilton Aitken, *Behind the Bungalow* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Company, 1889).

subordination in the master/mistress–servant relations vary appreciably within diverse temporalities.

The norms and patterns of interaction and difference are constantly established not only through command, and historically through laws and regulations as invariably they were found tilted in the favour of masters and mistresses, but also through comedy. In eighteenth-century England, the most common form of expressing the relationship between masters and servants, Carolyn Steedman suggests, was comedic.<sup>28</sup> In a passing remark on servants depicted in films, Radhika Chopra quips, ‘but [these] narratives are romanticised or [are] comedic versions of servitude.’<sup>29</sup> We contend that these comical depictions need to be taken more seriously than the above statement suggests. Who gets to laugh at whom, was a question that reflected the dynamics of social power and relationship.<sup>30</sup> On a boat journey on the Ganga, James Francis Hawkins (a Bengal civil servant who wrote this episode in his diary) together with his friend, nicknamed Q, encountered a squall. They called Stawasy Khan, the most favourite servant of Q. While Q was sitting on the chair barely able to hold his falling wine glass, bottle and a book, Khan tried to prevent an almirah from falling off. Hawkins noted in his diary: ‘Q laughs at Stawasy.’ Q then told James: ‘Hey Jim, look at Stawasy’s face.’<sup>31</sup> While the two masters laughed at the servant, the readers of Hawkins’ diary, who were his two younger sisters in England, would have also laughed at the description their brother provided of Stawasy Khan. Khan’s ‘head was nearly as large as his body ... [with] very short 4 ft 6 his legs shockingly bawdy with very large feet, and as broad as he is long’, adding in the end, ‘I say don’t, quig him.’<sup>32</sup>

Laughter between social unequals, particularly colonial masters and mistresses joking about and caricaturing their ethnographicised servants, reveals the constitution of racial inequality. Domestic service was not just an example on which racialised encounters took place, but as Karen

<sup>28</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>29</sup> Chopra, ‘Servitude and Sacrifice’, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Lucy Delap, ‘Kitchen-Sink Laughter: Domestic Service Humor in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 3, 2010, 623–54.

<sup>31</sup> *Diaries and Letters of James Francis Hawkins*, Mss Eur B 365/4, ff 7–8, British Library.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, ff 3–4.



FIGURE 11: Stawasy Khan

Courtesy: © British Library Board, Diaries and Letters of James Francis Hawkins, Mss Eur B 365/4, ff. 3–4.

Tranberg Hansen has shown in the case of colonial Zambia, was also ‘one of the earliest points of entry through which Africans were incorporated, on very unequal terms, into the colonial economy’.<sup>33</sup> In the Indian case, such an argument prioritising domestic service as the earliest entry points into the colonial economy might prove misleading. The nature of colonial political economy, as it developed first in Bengal and Madras and then elsewhere, shows that textile artisans, petty revenue officials, peasants and a host of labouring groups such as masons, carpenters,

<sup>33</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, ‘Household Work as a Man’s Job: Sex and Gender in Domestic Service in Zambia’, *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 3, 1986, 18.

boatmen, palanquin bearers and, not least, convicts made an entry into the regulative aspects of colonial political economy at the same time. There is, however, no denying the fact that in (ex)-colonial societies, race and domestic work were inseparable. In nineteenth-century America, one-third of adult domestic workers were black men.<sup>34</sup> Beyond political economy, it was the domain of everyday life of Europeans in India that was littered and, if we may invoke the spirit of an eighteenth-century Briton in Calcutta, 'infested' with servants. It is hardly surprising that each of the 20 drawings in a text entitled *The European in India* (1813) carried vignettes of the 'ubiquitous' servants. Nor could it be a mere coincidence that 19 of these sketches were set indoors. The one set outdoors was not too exceptional either: it showed the governor-general and the native nawab enjoying breakfast in the open while also watching an elephant-fight.<sup>35</sup> The large number of servants, as was the case in colonial households in India, provided the context to generate satirical takes on European lifestyles in India.<sup>36</sup> Servants are laughed at but are not expected to talk back. A common refrain in Hindi language is, therefore, of *naukar ko zyada moonh nahi lagana chahiye*, not to become too friendly (chatty) with servants (also additionally, not to allow them to become so).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ratna Saptari, 'Rethinking Domestic Service', *International Review of Social History* 44, no. 1, 1999, 82. Yet, the bulk of published research on race and colonialism has failed to explain the centrality of domestic servants beyond a very specific tie of memsahibs and ayahs. Another variant of this scholarship has remained focused on the question of 'low Europeans', right from Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980) to Harald Fisher-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans. Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009). A welcome addition enlarging the scope into domestic sphere is by Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Charles D'Oyly, *The European in India: From a Collection of Drawings* (London: Edward Orme, 1813).

<sup>36</sup> George Francklin Atkinson, 'Curry & Rice,' *on Forty Plates: or, the Ingredients of Social Life at 'Our Station' in India* (London: Day & Son, 1860). Particularly notice the visuals in that book.

<sup>37</sup> Also see Premchand, *Saubhagya ke Kode*. The *Babuji* (master figure) in a Hindi short story, *Bahadur*, would desire to chat with the boy-servant but would refrain. He would rather become very serious and turn the other way round. Amarkant, *Bahadur*,

Servants were and are intimate enough to laugh at, yet they are always distant enough to not laugh with.

Perhaps, in the Indian context, servants' names should be the first place to start thinking of the interlaced histories of the comic and the tragic, the former on the part of the master/mistress and the latter of the servant. In the South Asian case, there are generic terms that define and reflect a range of relationships of servitude: *ghulam*, *naukar*, *chakar*, *dasa/dasi*, *sevak*, *saheli*, *ladka*, *chokra/chokri*. We will return to these terms' utility in charting a longer history of domestic servants and service from pre- and early modern to modern, but for now, if we move beyond the generic to individual names we can still see how the personhood of the servant is often a part of the collective. This amounts to denial of the subjectivity itself. While one can turn to law and state policies to understand the legal constitution of servants' subjectivity as part of the master/mistress–servant relationship, the social acts of speech provide another angle to think of servants' social standing as individuals.

Some names or practical pet names are derived from physical deformity: *langda* (wimpy, *langdi* for female), *behra* (deaf, and *behri* for female), *kaana* (squint, and *kaani* for female), *totla* (one who stammers, and *totli* for female); *kubra* (hunchback, and *kubri* for female); some from skin colour such as *kalua* (dark-skinned boy) and *kaari* (dark-skinned girl). Some refer to social conditions: *khairati* (dependent on doles), *ram bharosey* (on god's will); and some to castes—brahman cooks often referred to as *maharaj-ji*, a superior honorific form of address, and lower caste as *bhangi* (pejorative derogatory caste collective used for sweepers and waste cleaners).<sup>38</sup> A very common practice is to turn age-based status

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a short Hindi story written in the 1960s, available at <http://www.hindisamay.com/content/10293/1/अमरकांत-कहानियाँ-बहादुर.csp> (accessed on 22 May 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Hiring a brahman cook was preferred in households of good means across regions of eastern and northern India, which perhaps only started weakening much later in the twentieth century. According to a proverb, however, they were also difficult to keep in check for their reckless expenditure because of their caste 'superiority'. The proverb said that if one wants to lose money, then one of the ways was by hiring a brahman servant. In the late nineteenth-century Bengal, a number of non-brahman domestics from Orissa donned the quintessential sacred thread to pass as brahman cooks in Calcutta. Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domestics*. For the proverb, see Christian, *Behar Proverbs*, 74–75.



into names: *babua* (child), *buddha* (an old man), *budhiya* (an old woman). The internalisation of such names by servants appears to be a norm. The orphan-boy protagonist of *Saubhagya ke Kode* came from the bhangi caste. He had a name, Nathua. He used to sweep the floor at his master's house. But all other servants of the household used to call him bhangi. The author noted that the poor chap had no clue what a name could do to his status. He found no harm in being called a bhangi.

Names based on physical deformity point to social and physical conditions of this class of the people. When called out loud, they offer a humorous moment for masters, marking out a distance. The counter-question is not mistaken if we want to assess the value of names and ways servants are called: would a dark-coloured master or mistress ever be called *kalua* and *kaari*. Some names were invented just because they gave masters a moment of laughter. In the late eighteenth century, the Britons in India were amused by a rather generic name of a group of servants called *Ramjani*, or in the contemporary Anglicised spelling *Ramzauny*. One interpretation was that the name was given to those who were born during the month of Muslim fasting, *Ramjan*. These were low-class Muslims who had picked up some English and made themselves employable in European households. For Europeans, of course, they practised 'an infinity of rogueries' but confessedly were 'highly convenient'. This dual feature required a 'ludicrous corruption' of the name, thus turning *Ramzauny* into *Rum-Johnnies*, the implication being of these deceitful servants stealing their masters' belongings at the first opportunity.<sup>39</sup> While servants are required to address every member of the household with respect, their own name could be corrupted, chiselled and redesigned according to the masters and mistresses' whim. If *Ramjani* of the eighteenth century became *Rum-Johnnies*, then *Dilbahadur* of the 1960s became simply *bahadur*—the generic Nepali male servant in cities across north and east of India.<sup>40</sup> In north India in

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Williamson, *East India Vade-Mecum*, vol. 1 (London: Black, Parry, and Kingsbury, 1810), 168–69. The *khansaman*, who was usually the steward or the head of the domestic establishment in European households, was nicknamed as 'the consumer', for, the 'young frivolous [European] men' alleged that his monthly bills consumed their substance. C. T. Buckland, 'Men-Servants in India', *The National Review*, January 1892, 664.

<sup>40</sup> Amarkant, *Bahadur*. In the story the mistress removed the word *dil* from the

post-Partition times, 'generic' proper nouns often replace the individual names of the servants—for example, Ramu for a man and Chotu for a boy. It is difficult to say if this pattern of naming is unique to the Indic context. However, it is probably no coincidence that a *varna*-wise distinction in naming pattern was prescribed by none other than Manu, the most famous and most widely cited of law-givers in the Sanskrit tradition. A brahman's name was to sound auspicious (*mangalyam*), the kshatriya's valiant, the vaishya's wealthy and the shudra's must express slander (*jugupsa*).<sup>41</sup>

One of the possible ways of writing servants' pasts, we claim, is to understand and analyse the co-existence of the hidden script of interaction and the established terms on which distant proximities were maintained. Such an approach is possible by closely looking at the contexts of our sources and materials and simultaneously reading them through an open-ended dialogue between past contexts and present practices, as Uma Chakravarti and Raffaella Sarti suggest in their Interjections in this volume. Such an approach requires identifying and scraping off of some layers of wilful strategies adopted to make the master-servant relationship appear benign and cordial. It requires us, among other things, to turn the master's laughter into a methodological tool to understand the servant's tragic situation.

In his short story *Sukhe Sawan* ('The Dry Rains', 1987), Ahmad depicts the life of a lovelorn middle-aged woman whose daughter and son-in-law had just departed from the house and the husband is only present through intense memories and flashbacks. When Ram Dulari, the sweeper woman, came to clean the toilet, the mistress was reminded of an earlier conversation with her husband, which had 'split her sides laughing'. Ram Dulari's nickname was Platform, because 'everyone jumped on [her] without paying'.<sup>42</sup> Every brat in the neighbourhood who attained puberty tried her out first. She was 'surprisingly' of a fair complexion with

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boy's name; the word means heart in Hindi, thus betraying the mistress' awkwardness in calling the boy-servant with a name that invokes the word *dil*, usually reserved for feelings of romance.

<sup>41</sup> Manu, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of Manava-dharmaśāstra*, ed. and tr. Patrick Olivelle, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31.

<sup>42</sup> Memon, *Colour of Nothingness*, 3.

lovely eyes. The mistress thought she did not look like a sweeper woman at all. And then she remembered her husband telling her about Dulari being a bastard child of a *Sayyid*.<sup>43</sup> She went further back in memory to correct herself about the reason why she had laughed on recalling Dulari's nickname. She had teased her husband: 'So did you hop on to the Platform too?' Ram Bharosey, Dulari's husband, had left her for another woman. In the story, both Dulari and her *Bibiji* (mistress) suffer from the pain and anguish of being left alone. But they did not share an emotional space. The readers stay with the pathos of the mistress while Dulari's presence is turned into a moment of comedy, potentially meant to evoke laughter both in the mistress and the readers.

On a different note, it is interesting how a literary device used to explain the 'transgressive' potential of an atypical quality of physical appearance or otherwise, appearing on either side of the master/servant divide, persists across vast chronological/spatial/linguistic divides. Thus, for example, a story in a fifteenth-century Sanskrit treatise on political ethics and manliness explains away the vices of a brahman boy by revealing in the end that in fact he was born not of his mother's brahman husband but a Chandala (an outcaste).<sup>44</sup> A comparable story about a Sayyid's son is found in the fourteenth-century Persian *mal'fuz* of Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya.<sup>45</sup>

Back to Ram Dulari, in the story cited, once she picked up her basket, balancing it 'deftly on her left hip', and walked towards the door, she never came back in the story. Literature provides more registers of unearthing servants' pasts than do archival bureaucratic records, but beyond the entry and exit which servants made in their masters'/mistresses' households, much is left to our speculative imagination and informed historical reconstruction.<sup>46</sup> This brief encounter between the mistress and the

<sup>43</sup> Sayyids are supposed to be direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad and hence of exalted stock. Within the purity-template of varna-based differential entitlements in South Asia, Sayyid status might often carry attendant claims of relative purity.

<sup>44</sup> Vidyapati, *Puruṣaparīkṣā*, ed. and tr. Surendra Jha 'Suman', 2nd edn (Patna: Maithili Akademi, 1988), 84.

<sup>45</sup> Amir Hasan Sizji, *Fawa'id al Fu'ad*, tr. Bruce B. Lawrence (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 352.

<sup>46</sup> A short story in Urdu, *Mai Dada*, by Asad Muhammad Khan, is a good example of biographical sketches of servants, even though it largely concentrated on one particular life moment. In the case of *Mai Dada*, it was his old age leading to death.

servant reveals the challenges of writing the history of domestic service and servants. After Dulari, a host of other servants or those tied in the relationship of service, came into the courtyard of Bibiji. They all, after performing their assigned tasks, disappeared.

## Sites

Household then is the obvious and critical site for tracing the nature of master/mistress–servant relationship. Based on the available research on family and household in South Asia, we can safely conclude that their nature has fundamentally changed over a period of three to four centuries. In precolonial and early colonial times, there was a considerable degree of malleability that included proximate and dependent relationships beyond biological relatedness.<sup>47</sup> This is brought out in the contributions on Mughal and Rajputana households in the current volume. In contrast, at least from the period of the nineteenth century onwards, family increasingly meant blood-based kinship. Slaves, servants and a host of other types of dependencies were no longer seen as part of the family. The terms of fictive/constructed kinship, however, prevailed—a boy servant would be *son-like* or a girl servant *daughter-like*, showing, perhaps, the persistence of the older forms of dependencies. When it comes to reminding the value of hard work in life, the servant becomes *son-like* but soon he is reminded that he is just a servant and not a boy of the family when it comes to the masters and mistresses doing something for him. The ties of family in which servants become enmeshed are ever-nebulous. It would be misleading to treat them as ‘artificial’. The expectation of work and

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Asad Muhammad Khan, ‘The Man With Three Names’, tr. Muhammad Umar Memon, *Words without Borders*, June 2009, available at <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-man-with-three-names> (accessed on 20 May 2018). We are thankful to Kamran Asdar Ali for giving the reference and the English translation text.

<sup>47</sup> Leigh Denault, ‘The Home and the World: New Directions in the History of the Family in South Asia’, *History Compass* 12, no. 2, 2014, 101–11; Indrani Chatterjee, ed., *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Radhika Singha, ‘Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the “Head of the Household”, 1772–1843’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 309–43; Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery, and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

show of loyalty are also genuinely crafted in this nebulous setting, which remains highly contextual, highly conjectural. Of course, as the nature of family and household has changed, so have the bases of loyalty and obligation. The shift from live-in to part-time live-out nature of servant hiring is a case in point.

In the post-colonial period, akin to the European pattern, the nuclearisation of family coupled with internal migration of middle-class younger people to expanding metropolitan cities, where both husband and wife work, has led to an increased demand for paid domestic work. The contemporary working wife would not decline the suggestion of keeping a servant as Premchand's husband-protagonist's wife did less than a century ago.<sup>48</sup> For these workers from the global south, at least in Europe, who go there from the global south, the language of affective, familial relationship is becoming a site of contestation. As Anderson's one interviewee servant claimed: the problem is not that the employer's family treat her as a slave, the problem is in treating her as part of family. The jealous emphasis on treating servants like kin could very obviously be a strategy to bolster up the humane image; the fact that Bahadur was claimed to be treated like one was deliberately 'broadcasted' in the whole of the neighbourhood by none other than his mistress. If in the early modern period, the expansive nature of family and household meant 'social life' (and not 'social death' for a range of dependents), then in the contemporary, the language of kinship is both a remnant of the past practices of affinal subordination as well as a newly contextualised instrument of being seen as 'good masters and mistresses' in the light of the modern-day changed notions of family and dependence.

<sup>48</sup> There seems, however, to be one difference between European and Indian expansion of the domestic work and care economy. Europe overall has an ageing generation that requires care work; in contrast, according to the 2011 census in India, 41 per cent of the population is below the age of 20 years, 50 per cent between 20 and 59, and only 9 per cent above the age of 60 years. The increasing participation of middle-class women in public work (and even home-based work) seemingly has created a spurt in servants' requirement. For Europe, see B. Anderson, 'Servants and Slaves'. Also see data on India taken from FP Staff, 'Latest Census Data Shows Youth Surge: Nearly 41% of India's Population is Below the Age of 20', *Firstpost*, 13 January 2016, available at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/latest-census-data-shows-youth-surge-nearly-41-of-indias-population-is-below-the-age-of-20-2581730.html> (accessed on 24 May 2018).

If we strive to write the servants' history by keeping servants at the centre of the narrative, then we cannot only remain limited to the site of household. When servants such as Ram Dulari never return in the narrative after leaving the house, when servants usually appear only in times of encounters (in judicial archives as witnesses or accused), in visuals as ornamented or staged, and in administrative proceedings/documents as and when bills and acts were discussed, then we need to find ways to trace servants outside the household. Servants' pasts were scattered around both home and outside. They unfolded across both private and public spheres. The private and public, family and household, themselves were reconstituted, affecting the tenets of the master/mistress-servant relationship. One of the ways of retrieving servants outside of the household is by closely looking at the nature of the 'traffic' that linked the house with the outside. Simon Rastén in this volume has taken this approach by looking at the act of 'thieving'. While doing so, we can keep servants in the centre-stage of our own narratives and show linkages between household, arrack house, gambling dens, and inns and taverns. Lakshmi Subramanian's reading of two court cases tell us about the sociability of servants outside of the household in places such as the garden of a local dargah. Nitin Sinha's chapter, through tracing the 'servant problem', shows the close proximity between the category of the public labour 'coolie' and what was becoming privatised as a labouring form, domestic servant in the context of urban Calcutta.

There, of course, are alternative ways of approaching this theme as pointed out by other scholars. Radhika Chopra has highlighted the value of biographical approach (extending to generational change) for writing on servants.<sup>49</sup> This indeed is better suited for working on contemporary times. For historical pasts with which our volumes deal, literary, archival and visual sources present a great difficulty in stringing together a continuous life trajectory or biography of servants as individuals. In this regard, Shivangini Tandon's innovative use of *tazkiras* (biographical sketches from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) in her chapter to reconstruct master-servant relationships is highly commendable. A more sustained interest in the early modern period (see chapters by Sajjad

<sup>49</sup> Chopra, 'Servitude and Sacrifice'.

Alam Rizvi, Geetanjali Tyagi and Priyanka Khanna on Mughal and Rajput households in this volume) will show the limits of the structural and affective production of the modern family as a trans-historical institution, and detail the possibilities and a range of familial and kinship ties which bound various members of the stratified households—including servants and masters.<sup>50</sup>

## AGENCY, RESISTANCE

Kali (a generic term for dark-skinned female), a *dasi* in early India, doubted if her mistress was by nature good hearted at all times or was it her efficient work that made her mistress appear good (see Uma Chakravarti's *Interjection* in this volume). In order to test her mistress' real nature, she got up late on three consecutive mornings. On the third, the mistress lost her temper and hit Kali with a heavy iron bolt. Kali successfully got her mistress to reveal her true nature, but she needed to go out in the neighbourhood with her blood-splattered head to show to everyone what the real nature of her mistress was. This example shows two things: one, the centrality of *work* done efficiently by servants that defines the good character of master/mistress; and second, the inevitability of public spaces—neighbourhood, bazaar, streets, alleys, and even courts and empires in the early modern period—to maintain as well as challenge the terms of master/mistress–servant relationship. As the graded histories of unequal, asymmetrical relationship need to be explored along temporal shifts, the spatial movements, connections, linkages also need to be discovered. They tell us about servants' sociability and they also tell us about their agency and resistance. It was the moment of resistance through shaming her mistress in the neighbourhood that Kali achieved through her display of blood-splattered forehead. Nathua, the *bhang*i boy, overstepped the limits of his social and servile order by lying down on the master's

<sup>50</sup> See 'Introduction' of Chatterjee, *Unfamiliar Relations*, and Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Honoring the Family: Narratives and Politics of Rajput Kinship in Pre-Modern Rajasthan', in *Unfamiliar Relations*; Sylvia Vatuk, "'Family" as a Contested Concept in Early-Nineteenth-Century Madras', in *Unfamiliar Relations*; and Michael H. Fisher, 'Becoming and Making "Family" in Hindustan', in *Unfamiliar Relations*.

granddaughter's bed. After getting a good thrashing, he ran out of the house and reached the main road, where he felt Rai Saheb (the master) could not do anything to him. He gained confidence in challenging his master: 'I will abuse and run away, who can catch me then. He turned his face towards the bungalow and shouted—come here I'll see you. And he ran away, lest Rai Saheb has heard him.'<sup>51</sup>

Locating agency and resistance in a relationship marked through 'proximate distance' or 'performative intimacy' with a porous stuffing of hidden scripts is not an easy task. The essence of the master–servant laws has been historically in favour of the former. In colonial times, the criminal breach of contract, the punitive aspect of the master–servant laws, heavily weighed upon servants' limited choices. A degree of violence, from abuse to physical thrashing, was not uncommon in either European or native households.<sup>52</sup> With the force of law and chastising stick on the side of the masters and mistresses, servants' resistance varied from episodic, and legal to the everyday. Servants complained about wage arrears, they dragged their masters to court for pensions. Servants also framed counter charges. In most of the cases of resistance premised upon control and discipline, one can detect a 'structural' commonality which both masters/mistresses and servants tried to use to their benefits. If servants were accused of demanding higher wages than stipulated, they accused the masters of wage-theft (strategically withholding wages); if servants were accused of stealing, as Simon Rastén argues in his chapter, they often levied the counter charge of beating.

But there is no parity either in the archives or in social practices between masters' propensity to punish through the use of institutions and servants' capacity to resist. The location of non-episodic resistance is therefore the everyday. We argue that the resistance in the realm of

<sup>51</sup> Premchand, *Saubhagya ke Kode*.

<sup>52</sup> A telling autobiographical account of master's atrocities is discussed in Ajmal Kamal, 'Islam, Caste, Slavery: A Narrative from Early 20th Century UP', *Round Table India*, 27 January 2018, available at [http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9286%3Acaste-based-slavery-in-shurafa-muslim-households-in-nwp-present-up-during-early-twentieth-century&catid=119%3Afeature&Itemid=132](http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9286%3Acaste-based-slavery-in-shurafa-muslim-households-in-nwp-present-up-during-early-twentieth-century&catid=119%3Afeature&Itemid=132) (accessed on 5 June 2018). It is based on Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *Aap Beeti* (Lucknow: Maktaba-e Firdaus, 1978).



everyday was also expressed through subverting or breaching the same codes of interaction—laughter, language, gesture, speech, places of access—that helped establish the masters'/mistresses' command. If servants were expected to be respectful, they in their moments of 'disobedience' talked back; if they were displeased, they went silent and did not answer. Both speech and silence were strategically used. They used places and commodities of the household that were forbidden for them. The flight or disappearance, as Nathua and Bahadur did, was the ultimate recourse of challenging the submission. Fleeing, however, should not be romanticised as a form of resistance as it entails a new cycle of uncertainty and hardship. It creates a 'social death' through severing of the ties of dependency. While Nathua returned in the narrative as an accomplished singer who finally got to marry his former master's granddaughter (through partial deceit), Bahadur, very much like Ram Dulari, escaped the household as well as the narrative without leaving with us any further possibility of knowing more about his life.

Speaking about resistance through the frameworks of class and subjugation necessarily creates the idea of collective. This idea—domestic servants as one *en bloc* group—is still under a putative form of 'making', so to say, as an outcome of the attempts to formalise the work and make these workers more visible in public and policy discourses. Such a collective manifests itself in a moment of crisis, as it recently happened in Noida.<sup>53</sup> In certain occupations, based upon caste and regional affinity, this happened in the past as well. The Oriya palanquin bearers in Calcutta struck work quite often in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on issues

<sup>53</sup> Abhishek Dey, 'In Noida, a Riot-like Situation over a Domestic Worker Puts the Focus on India's Bitter Class Chasm', *scroll.in*, 13 July 2017, available at <https://scroll.in/article/843601/in-noida-a-riot-like-situation-over-a-domestic-worker-puts-the-focus-on-indias-stark-class-chasm> (accessed on 5 June 2018); Amrit Dhillon, 'Routine Abuse of Delhi's Maids Laid Bare as Class Divide Spills into Violence', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/21/routine-abuse-delhi-maids-laid-bare-class-divide-violence-mahagun-moderne-india> (accessed on 5 June 2018); Nandini Rathi, 'Noida's Mahagun Moderne Episode is a Reminder of Discrimination, Vulnerability of Domestic Helps', *The Indian Express*, 13 July 2017, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/web-edits/noidas-mahagun-moderne-episode-is-a-reminder-of-discrimination-vulnerability-of-domestic-helps/> (accessed on 5 June 2018).

ranging from wage to discipline. Lakshmi Subramanian in her chapter shows the mobilisational power of family and caste on the part of the deceased servant in forcing the master to compensate for the loss of life of one of their brethren. But the uniqueness of the identity of domestic servant in being one of the group—servants often bundled together as *naukarlog* (in Hindi), *kaajerlog* (in Bengali) and *kaamwaali* (female servants, in Hindi)—and yet being individually tied to the seams of loyalty, obligation and duty makes resistance invisible. Nathua was after all called a *bhangi* not only by the master but by other servants of the household as well. Servants not only socialised with each other but, as Rastén has shown, also fought with and harmed each other. They were the bearers and carriers of the prestige of the household.<sup>54</sup> They represented a parcel of their masters' and mistresses' authority. A physical harm to a servant by the servants or the master of another household was perceived as an attack on the former's master himself. Sometimes, legislations helped certain categories of servants to acquire power over others. While some female domestic service providers turned to prostitution, it was the *dhyes*, another category of domestic servant, who through the intervention of colonial state and medical institutions, partially benefitted from the emerging employment avenues drawing on their 'traditional' roles in child-birth and child-care.<sup>55</sup>

Intersected by the ideas and practices of affect and loyalty, domestic servants' resistance is unlikely to appear as a collective action. It is here that we need to turn to the same registers of everyday interaction which we have outlined above—laughter, silence, speech, gesture, and so on—through which we could form some ideas on how servants expressed their displeasure. It is true that in the South Asian case the acute absence of any type of record left by servants themselves is glaring, but what is equally important, because of the paucity of work on this theme, is the re-training of our own gaze and lenses of history writing. Without this there can be a

<sup>54</sup> The story of Mai Dada illustrates this clearly. Mai Dada, the ageing old servant, basked in the glory of being a Pashtun as was the family in which he worked since childhood, but it was revealed only in the end, rather quite accidentally in the plot, that he was a low-caste Hindu. Khan, 'Man with Three Names'.

<sup>55</sup> Kokila Dang, 'Prostitutes, Patrons and the State: Nineteenth Century Awadh', *Social Scientist* 21, no. 9/11, 1993, 184–85.

danger of overstating the source-based difference between our case and those of other regions.<sup>56</sup>

## LENSES OF HISTORY AND DOMESTIC SERVANTS<sup>57</sup>

### Theoretical, Comparative

History in its modern avatar as a 'discipline' is itself an imperialist project that tries, or rather commits itself, to 'write the history of those who now inhabit the kingdom of the dead and who cannot answer back'. These are the paraphrased words of Carolyn Steedman who argues for the kind of history writing, invoking Sven Lindquist and Hans Medick, that 'digs deeper where one stands'.<sup>58</sup> The other end of the spectrum are the currents of 'global history' which, many serious practitioners themselves admit, run the risk of spreading vast but thin.<sup>59</sup> History writing has made significant shifts in the last 100 years. From kings we turned to writing about soldiers,

<sup>56</sup> The nature of the sources and servants being silenced in them does have a specific valence and weight in the South Asian case but we do not want to overstress the point that servants have left no record of their own in the South Asian context as the main reason for the paucity of scholarly works. The story of Phoebe Beatson has been reconstructed by Steedman through the diaries of her employer Robert Murgatroyd. Otherwise, apart from an 'X' in the marriage register, Beatson 'left no single word for her own in the record'. What indeed seems to be different is the way masters have meticulously recorded their servants in their diaries, not in any formulaic stereotypical way, as was the case with most Britons in India when writing about servants in their letters and diaries, but as individuals who were present around their lives. Quotation from: Amy Louise Erickson, 'What Shall We Do about the Servants?', *History Workshop Journal* 67, no. 1, 2009, 278. Also see Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>57</sup> We are thankful to Jana Tschurennev, Raffaella Sarti, Samita Sen, Tanika Sarkar and Vidhya Raveendranathan for reading drafts and offering many useful suggestions and references for this section.

<sup>58</sup> These are the words uttered formally and informally during the second international conference, 'Servants' Pasts', Berlin, 11–13 April 2018. Reproduced here with Steedman's consent.

<sup>59</sup> An attempt to bring into dialogue the two levels of history writing (global and microhistory) has been recently proposed by Francesca Trivellato, 'Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?', *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1, 2011.

from men to women, from states to localities, from structures to processes, and from markets to emotions. Decades ago, South Asian history writing highlighted the value of exploring the category of, and writing about, subalterns. The autonomy of consciousness and action highlighted and represented a historical social disjunct—between elites and subalterns. Peasants, farmers and industrial workers formed the bulk of the social-subaltern. In this way, the discipline of History took on new historical subjects; history, the assemblage and chronicling of the past, gained a new angle of vision. The gaze from ‘below’ substituted the view from the top. Why did the South Asian version of history from below and the more sophisticated Subaltern Studies fail to account for servants is one of the first questions that come to mind.<sup>60</sup>

In order to address this question, we need to first look at conceptual issues involved in writing the history of domestic servants or paid domestic work, as raised by scholars working on other regions. Several scholars have explained the silence as a result of the abstract and restricted conceptualisation of ‘labour’. A slightly provocative but helpful illustrative one-sentence explanation comes from Amy Louise Erickson: ‘Men from Adam Smith to Karl Marx to E. P. Thompson have failed to take account of domestic labour, perhaps largely because they never did it.’<sup>61</sup> We presume that the charge here is not directed towards any of the named individuals personally (as they also did not work in factories either) but to the ways these authors and theorists have understood labour as exclusively linked to commodity production and therefore deemed as productive (as against the domestic work that stayed in the realm of ‘unproductive’). With industrialisation, labour largely became reduced to ‘productive activities’ done outside the household (and mostly by men). There was therefore

<sup>60</sup> The Subaltern Studies project (volume 1 to volume 11) addressed several subaltern subjects but not domestic servants.

<sup>61</sup> Erickson, ‘What Shall We Do about the Servants?’ 283. Also see, Carmen Sarasua, ‘Were Servants Paid According to Their Productivity?’ in *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th–21st Centuries*, ed. A. Fauve-Chamoux (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004), 517–54; Paul Minoletti, ‘The Importance of Ideology: The Shift to Factory Production and Its Effect on Women’s Employment Opportunities in the English Textile Industries, 1760–1850’, *Continuity and Change* 28, no. 1, 2013, 121–46.

a two-fold bifurcation or ideological construction at play: one spatial and the second gendered. Work done by men outside the household constituted and defined labour. What women did inside the household was basically, according to this new theoretical and ideological construction, an extension of the 'biologically-driven' and 'natural' instinct to cook, feed, sew, bring up children and care, something that was innate to being a woman rather than seen as work.<sup>62</sup> A third binary construct, a crude Marxist one, overlaid the spatial and gendered divide: the notion that within the context of modes of production and the political economy in general, labour was that which generated value. For it was this 'exchange value' created by labour that constituted the 'real' workers.<sup>63</sup>

In this conceptual framework developed on the basis of European trajectory and experience, the home itself acquired a new ideological profile owing to industrialisation but also, as some would argue, due to the 'invention' of the childhood and consumer revolution that happened in Europe following the establishment of the European East India companies.<sup>64</sup> The new wealth from the colonies was changing the British 'aristocratic' lifestyle and creating a new class of non-aristocratic nabobs.

In any case, the paradigm of a gendered division of labour, within and outside the family, persisted, notwithstanding the empirically verifiable fact that a vast majority of women worked in mills and factories. Notably, women in the mills worked only in such subordinate positions that it could never unsettle the gender hierarchies even as women with an independent source of income did create new possibilities of social churning. Equally, working children were hardly an aberration in the ideal construct of the family, and some men never ceased to be domestic servants.<sup>65</sup> The conceptual division of work and non-work along the axis of site (factory

<sup>62</sup> Mary. E. John, 'The Woman Question: Reflections on Feminism and Marxism', *Economic & Political Weekly* 52, no. 50, 2017, 71–79.

<sup>63</sup> Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>64</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Making of Home* (London: Atlantic, 2014), ch. 1. Raffaella Sarti, on the other hand, has in personal communication alerted us towards the contested nature of the argument on the role of 'consumer revolution'.

<sup>65</sup> Raffaella Sarti, 'Men at Home: Domesticities, Authority, Emotions and Work (Thirteenth–Twentieth Centuries)', *Gender & History* 27, no. 3, 2015, 521–58.

and home) and gender (male and female) thus had limitations as shown by empirical studies. What did this mean for paid domestic work?

The exclusion of domestic from the remit of productive work led to the exclusion of domestic work itself from the category of labour. The gendered notion of domestic work in Western societies (the increasing feminisation of domestic work due to industrialisation) seems to be a reason why domestic work itself got written off the category of labour.<sup>66</sup> The implication was that a majority of the eighteenth-century working or labouring population of Europe, that is, domestic servants, failed to qualify for the category of 'labour', the analytical category that has claimed for itself the prime status for writing the social itself.<sup>67</sup> But in the last three decades, and perhaps for even longer, paid domestic service/work has been extensively researched in Europe and North America to not only explain the relationship between master and servant through law and labour but also to write the histories of family, household and childhood.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> The pace at which this happened differed within Europe; for instance, it happened earlier in England than in France. See Saptari, 'Rethinking Domestic Service', 80–81.

<sup>67</sup> See Steedman's evocative critique of E. P. Thompson in attempting to rewrite the 'Making of the English Working Class' through female domestic servants. Steedman, *Labours Lost*.

<sup>68</sup> See the special issue by Patrizia Delpiano and Raffaella Sarti, eds, 'Servants, Domestic Workers and Children. The Role of Domestic Personnel in the Upbringing and Education of the Master's and Employer's Children from the Sixteenth to Twenty-first Centuries', *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 43, no. 4, 2007, 485–626; it looks at the relationship between children and servants. None of the papers in the issue deal with South Asia though. In the South Asian context, this relationship has predominantly been studied in European households between *babalog* (European children, as they were called in India) and servants. For the general colonial context, See Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), which has provided an interpretive framework in developing the intimate yet troubled relationship between the colonisers and the colonised through exploring the affective ties between white children and Javanese nannies. For the Indian case, attempts have been made to study the relationship between white memsahibs, babalog and domestic servants including ayahs. See Sen, *Woman and Empire*; Elizabeth M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800–1947* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); and Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

## Gender

'Domestic work' became critical to the thinking of the 1970s and 1980s feminist activist-academic intervention that theorised 'unpaid domestic work' as well as focused attention on women's labour.<sup>69</sup> Almost in the same decades in India, when 'history from below' and 'Subaltern Studies' took roots as new ground-breaking modes of doing 'popular histories' in South Asian history writing, women and gender perspectives also became equally important.<sup>70</sup> In hindsight, it might be said that a closer conversation between these two new modes of thinking would have been fruitful. While acknowledging their contribution, a critique, shot through a privileged position of hindsight, would not go amiss.

The new gender-informed rethinking led to an interest in the questions and specificities of paid women employment but usually remained restricted to those who worked or migrated to find employment in mines, plantations and factories.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the default association of factory/public/productive with the category of labour was not completely severed. Second,

<sup>69</sup> Also in the Western trajectory of this new intervention, barely any attention was paid to the issue of paid domestic work. See Saptari, 'Rethinking Domestic Service', 77–78.

<sup>70</sup> While 'history from below' brought to the centre the categories of peasant and labour, its other foot, so to say, was often rooted in exploring their role in the 'mass politics' of national movement. See various essays published in the first three volumes of Subaltern Studies: Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies No. 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies No. 2: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies No. 3: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984). Also see Sumit Sarkar, 'Popular' Movements and 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a 'History from Below' (Calcutta: K P Bagchi & Company, 1983). The landmark book on gender in South Asian writing was, and continues to be, Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989). One of the earliest writings on women and labour was Radha Kumar, 'Family and Factory: Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry 1919–39', in *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State*, ed. J. Krishnamurty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 133–62.

<sup>71</sup> This has been the spatial remit of the 'women/gender history' from within the writings of Indian labour history; that too, it must be stressed, has largely remained marginal within the Indian labour history writing. More on this follows.

the theoretical debates on *unpaid* domestic labour did not adequately breach the realm of *paid* domestic labour performed by hired servants. As a result, the insightful conceptualisations of, say, the linkages between domestic labour, sacrificial ideologies and (re)productive labour, that remained valid at the level of wife, left the histories of paid domestic labour underdeveloped in the South Asian context. To be fair, the scope did expand to include other statuses of women such as widowhood and prostitution. We are aware that widows' trajectory between unpaid housework, paid domestic work and prostitution/sex work is, both historically and in contemporary times, complicated and blurred. Similarly, the boundary between domestic service and prostitution, not only through sexual control over female servants' bodies but also through economic and urban changes, is porous.<sup>72</sup> What remains a contrasting feature between prostitution and waged domestic work nonetheless is this: Dang convincingly shows that through laws and regulations, colonial state turned prostitution into a form of labour service like other forms of labour. Although wage and other types of regulation were in force for domestic servants also, as Simon Rastén and Nitin Sinha's chapters in this volume show, domestic servant never fully became a labouring category like others. Moreover, one can raise questions about the starkness of the 'colonial break': even in medieval times, prostitutes were graded, taxed, registered and seen as

<sup>72</sup> See Kumkum Sangari, 'The "Amenities of Domestic Life": Questions on Labour,' *Social Scientist* 21, no. 9/11, 1993, 3–46; Dang, 'Prostitutes, Patrons and the State'; Ratnabali Chatterjee, 'Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Construction of Class and Gender,' *Social Scientist* 21, no. 9/11, 1993, 159–72; Samita Sen, 'Impossible Immobility: Marriage, Migration and Trafficking in Bengal,' *Economic & Political Weekly* 51, no. 44–45, 2016, 46–54. Two contributions in the next volume by Satyasikha Chakraborty and Nitin Varma on ayahs chart two different possible trajectories of the relationship between emotional labour and sexual labour. See Satyasikha Chakraborty, 'From *Bibis* to *Ayahs*: Sexual Labour, Domestic Labour and the Moral Politics of Empire,' in *Servants' Pasts: Late Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia*, vol. 2, eds Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019) [forthcoming], and Nitin Varma, 'The Many Lives of *Ayah*: Life Trajectories of Female Servants in Early Nineteenth-Century India,' in *Servants' Pasts*, vol. 2. In contrast, when it came to poor European girls, Jana Tschurenev highlights the role of missionaries, education and the colonial state in possibly preventing these impoverished girls from falling into prostitution. See Jana Tschurenev, 'Training a Servant Class: Gender, Poverty and Domestic Labour in Early Nineteenth-Century Educational Sources,' in *Servants' Pasts*, vol. 2. These three chapters present a nuanced account of the interplay of race, gender and labour.



legal entities—they were allowed to appear as witnesses in the court.<sup>73</sup> There are hints of captive slaves becoming prostitutes. Similarly, morality was the preserve not only of Victorian Britons and the nineteenth-century Bengali *bhadralok* but of Mughal officials too, who equated the secluded neighbourhood of prostitutes with *shaitanpura* (devil's abode).

The new theoretical intervention on 'recasting women' identified, or at least mentioned in passing, the linkages between middle-class refashioning of the new women role and the arduous productive labour performed by female domestics. Nor was caste unnoticed; Sangari alluded to caste-driven sanctions in defining pure and impure work that were embedded in the gradations of domestic labour.<sup>74</sup> Instances of the influx of low-caste women into Calcutta in the second half of the nineteenth century, who took up either the work of maid or went into prostitution, were known.<sup>75</sup> The texts that were used to reconstruct the account of womanhood in the period of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, both as ideal wife and debased widow/prostitute, also referred to servants. But the politics of this 'recasting of women' was well-identified, that is, it was clear that the new ideological makeover was meant for the upper-caste Hindu women. The ideological-discursive construct of the middle-class 'wife' persisted and neither the male nor the female domestics could break into the narratives of the subaltern social history.

<sup>73</sup> Shadab Bano, 'Women Performers and Prostitutes in Medieval India', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 70, 2009–10, 252–53, 257.

<sup>74</sup> Sangari, 'The Amenities.' This essay in particular, and other contributions in the special issue of *Social Scientist* 21, no. 9/11, 1993, where they appeared, are rather undeservedly undermentioned in the literature on labour. Sangari's essay raises a host of questions along gender and class differentiation in domestic labour, which, in our understanding, were not followed by subsequent writings. One crucial class-based difference, according to Sangari, is this: the assisted labour of the middle-class women was often geared to 'family status production' while of poor rural or urban lower castes, who did paid domestic work, agrarian work as well as their own unpaid domestic work, was for subsistence. Domestic labour, therefore needs to be demarcated along the lines of who did it, even when the doers came from the same gender. See Sangari, 'The Amenities', 11–13. Also see Parvati Raghuram, 'Caste and Gender in the Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India', *Work, Employment & Society* 15, no. 3, 2001, 607–17.

<sup>75</sup> Chatterjee, 'Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal', 161.

The marriage between 'history from below' and 'gender studies' was of long-distance nature.<sup>76</sup>

One of the blind spots of the earlier 'wife-woman'-based reconceptualisation of (unpaid) domestic labour was the neglect of the gendered history of male domestics and their masculinity.<sup>77</sup> The effeminacy of Bengali *babus* has been a subject of historical research,<sup>78</sup> but in India, where the paid domestic work has historically been performed largely by men, it would appear that the visible feminisation of domestic service, at least in the urban areas, might not have started before the 1980s. Yet the larger methodological question of what was understood as feminine and what drove the earlier ubiquity of men in domestic service is only now beginning to be addressed in the South Asian context. As argued in a recent set of essays, domestic service is one of the most suitable sites for exploring the making of the 'hegemonic' and 'subaltern' masculinities and the changes

<sup>76</sup> This issue has been addressed from a different lens in a recent debate on intersectionality among Indian feminists. Nivedita Menon, for instance, has questioned the validity of intersectionality as a 'universal' framework for highlighting the interlocking structures of oppression as she claims that it frequently ends up obscuring specific histories. She instead contends that the presumed subject of feminist politics in India has been destabilised more effectively by the politics of caste, religious community identity and sexuality. This position has been qualified and challenged by other scholars who find value in engaging with this framework. Nivedita Menon, 'Is Feminism about Women? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India', *Economic and Political Review* 50, no. 17, 2015, 37–44; Mary E. John, 'Intersectionality: Rejection or Critical Dialogue?' *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 33, 2015, 72–76; Jennifer C. Nash, 'The Institutional Lives of Intersectionality', *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 38, 2015, 74–76.

<sup>77</sup> A theme which recently has caught attention of a few select scholars, Swapna Banerjee, Raka Ray, Fae Dussart and Radhika Chopra. In the context of white mistress and male servants, see the interesting work of Claire Lowrie on Singapore and Darwin, who argues that the 'tussle' between them exceeded the gender politics, that is, the assertion of Chinese houseboys needs to be also located in the context of 'the nationalist, anti-colonial and communist ideologies which overseas Chinese communities were grappling with in this era'. Claire Lowrie, 'White Mistresses and Chinese "Houseboys": Domestic Politics in Singapore and Darwin from the 1910s to the 1930s', in *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie (New York: Routledge, 2015), 210–11.

<sup>78</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and The 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

therein brought about by marriage, age, deformity, sickness and other aspects that could recalibrate the master–servant relationship.<sup>79</sup> In European households in India, this led to a uniform infantilisation of male domestics: an ageing servant would still be called a ‘boy’. If there exists a hidden script between master/mistress and servant, as argued above, then does it also exist for male servants in adjusting their conduct at two locations: one, the household of their work where they are routinely supervised by women, and second, their own where they would attempt to regain their masculine control through patriarchal ideology and breadwinner identity?<sup>80</sup> Anecdotally, the crisis in normative masculinity and the attempt to ‘regain’ it can be observed in the changed preference over the last 30 years of rural men migrating to cities and choosing to work as ‘labour’ (daily wage based in informal sectors or attempting to find grade IV jobs such as peons and gatekeepers in government offices) than to become a domestic servant.<sup>81</sup> But for masters and mistresses in these cities, male migrant servants are, on contrary, a threat precisely because of their alleged hyper masculinity. Nuclear families, especially with daughters around, see the presence of young or adult male servants as a threat, which has made female servants desirable. It is interesting to note that while masculinity remains a common issue for both servants and masters at the site of work, its perception by them is tied to two opposing poles. For male servants, domestic work

<sup>79</sup> Raffaella Sarti and Francesca Scrinzi, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: Men in a Woman’s Job, Male Domestic Workers, International Migration and the Globalization of Care’, *Men and Masculinities* 13, no. 1, 2010, 4–15. A very good example of such recalibration is in the story of Mai Dada, referred earlier.

<sup>80</sup> Both Ray and Chopra in a slightly variant way suggest that the regaining of masculinity by male servants happens by equating fatherhood with manhood, that is, by asserting their role as the ones providing for the family in a way that their children do not become servants. While this appears to be the case, in Ray’s argument this reclaim happens in the mirror of the ideal image of *bhadralok* culture, which is problematically presented as a uniform master narrative. Raka Ray, ‘Masculinity, Femininity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century’, *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3, 2000, 691–718; Chopra, ‘Servitude and Sacrifice’.

<sup>81</sup> It might be the case that such preference is shot through the issue not only of masculinity but also of economic opportunity which the cities and small towns provided even from earlier decades than the 1970s and 1980s. See P. C. Roy Chaudhury, *Bihar District Gazetteers: Purnea* (Patna: Secretariat Press 1963), 452–54.

emasculated their masculinity, for masters and mistresses it gave a scope and chance to perform their hyper masculinity and thus become a threat.

Similarly, the wife-based discussions on (unpaid) domestic labour only partially allow us to grasp the nuances of the mistress–female servant relationship. The intersection of gender and cultural history writing, as it developed in the last two decades in India, primarily remained fixated with the middle-class *shaleen*, *bhadramahila* (women of rank or an upper-caste-class woman) and their role in the newly crafted contours of the home under the impulse of a nationalist response to the colonial discourse.<sup>82</sup> It conceptually privileged a flattening of the patriarchal authority by clubbing together the dependents (wives, children and servants), whose inter-relationships, as some recent research suggests, were fraught with anxieties, transgressions and power play.<sup>83</sup> It is worth going back to the question Uma Chakravarti provocatively posed more than two decades ago: when upper-caste Hindu women were enjoined to participate in the project of providing physically and morally strong progeny for the nation but doing so by employing the wet nurse, who were these wet nurses anyway?<sup>84</sup> Refocusing our gaze away from wives to servants might be an

<sup>82</sup> This literature is obsessively preoccupied with ascertaining the nature of the relationship between public and private in regard to the politics over ‘women question’ in the context of the ‘derivative’ ideologies, legal changes, education, reformist agenda, race-based nation building, and cultural moorings of home and conjugality. Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question’, in *Recasting Women*; a leading critique of the ‘two domain’ postulation of home and outside as proposed by Chatterjee came from Tanika Sarkar, ‘The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal’, *Studies in History* 8, no. 2, 1992, 213–35. Later, Banerjee, who worked on domestic servants, seemingly used this framework of the middle-class formation to extend the remit of the debate from the husband–wife to servants. But the formation of the middle class was at the core of her inquiry as well. Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity*.

<sup>83</sup> Indrani Sen, *Memsahib’s Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008); Chaudhury, ‘Memsahibs and Motherhood’; Chaudhury, ‘Memsahibs and Their Servants’; Charu Gupta, ‘Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India’, *Studies in History* 34, no. 2, 2018, 141–63; and Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity*.

<sup>84</sup> Uma Chakravarti, ‘Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past’, in *Recasting Women*, 27–87.

important step in the direction of answering this question. The chapters on the relationship between rani and davis in this volume address the differentiated notions of gender and domestic work. The chapters on ayahs, maids and poor European girls in the second volume further bring out the complexities of the intertwined histories of colonialism, sexual and emotional labour, and nationalism.

The narratives of overlaps and interconnections in the realm of domestic comprised a prominent theme in Hindi literature at the turn of the twentieth century. For instance, the wife accomplishing every household chore in time without any complaint was actually an act of 'magic' (*jaadu*) for the husband-protagonist of Premchand's story *Mahri*, which we have referred to above. The best part of this 'magical' arrangement, as the husband-protagonist noted, was that he did not have to pay for it. The 'good' husband, employed gainfully in the postal department, admitted to feeling ashamed of exploiting his wife. He insisted on hiring a maid for the household chores. The early twentieth-century wife replied: 'Why would you add to the expenditure, unnecessarily? I am not educated that I would laze around all day on the sofa or bed or go to the park to take a stroll everyday in the morning or evening. Let the house run the way it is running.' It was only on further insistence that she agreed to have a maid; but after the household had gone through the experience of keeping three different kinds of maids (all were eventually fired), the outcome was as follows: 'The lost peace has come back on its own. It is true, the age of keeping servants is gone. Every person is the best naukhar of himself/herself.' These were the wise words of the husband who had earlier admitted to not knowing how things related even to his personal care such as warm water on winter mornings, his shaving materials, washed utensils for *puja* and polished shoes were all arranged without his having to ask for them. And, as the story suggests, he did not do such work himself after firing the maids.

In economic terms, as the story above shows, women-wives at homes came free of cost, providing all domestic amenities; they in fact were 'better' than servants as they were assumed to be emotionally invested and taking deep personal care in the tasks they performed. The South Asian historiography has largely focused on this figure of the wife, explaining her unpaid work, unpacking the ideological baggage that convinced her

of the moral duty to manage the household in the most efficient manner by anticipating the requirements of every member of the family, or made her complicit in happily accepting the weight of domestic burden by turning it into a jaadu. Both the contemporary story and the subsequent historiography shared one thing. In the story, little thought was spared for any of the three other maid women, belonging to three different age groups and exuding different kinds of temperaments. They entered and exited the household as *naukrani* (maid servant). A majority of manuals on house-keeping, character building of women and her duties make woman-wife the doer of all chores, only mentioning in passing that she should be kind in her conduct towards servants. Servants' quick appearance and disappearance is noticeable in such stories as well as in manuals that kept the focus on the housewife. This persistence on understanding the wife-woman's role 'designed' for either within the household or the way they strived to become part of the 'outside politics' has been the staple of the subsequent path-breaking gendered historical accounts.<sup>85</sup>

The absence of servants and other social service-providing subalterns is equally marked in the new wave of writings on print and journals that looked at the issues of leisure, entertainment, nationalism, education and the carving of the 'new woman'.<sup>86</sup> As Sangari noted, in the reformist agenda

<sup>85</sup> For a very early and unique exploration of the non-middle class women—scavengers and peasants—which would have benefitted from being followed up subsequently by expanding into the study of urban female service providers, but unfortunately did not happen, see Tanika Sarkar, 'Politics and Women in Bengal—The Conditions and Meaning of Participation', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 21, no. 1, 1984, 91–101. Perhaps the constraints were already ingrained in the conceptual definition of the 'worker' as Sarkar herself notes that there was a 'definite equivalence between the potential for politicisation and a direct involvement with the production process'. Ibid., 95–96. Remarkably, Sarkar has gone back to this theme very recently through the intersecting lens of caste and work, seemingly revising the above formulation and offering rich insights to discover the histories of lowest social subalterns scattered in diffused sources and evidences because of the 'sheer non-representability of their lives in middle-class language'. Tanika Sarkar, "'Dirty Work, Filthy Caste': Calcutta Scavengers in the 1920s", in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), 179–82. Also see her contribution 'Caste-ing Servants in Colonial Calcutta' in *Servants' Pasts*, vol. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Ranikhet and Bangalore: Permanent Black, 2009); Ruby Lal,

of the late nineteenth century, servants were written off as ever doomed to remain ‘unreformable’.<sup>87</sup> In the discourses of *sharafat* and *khandani*, both signifying the quest for respectability, the girls or women of the same household (the social, kin equals) were used as examples of good and bad women.<sup>88</sup> We extend the argument of servants being written off in two ways: first, we suggest that there was a strategic invocation of servants within the overall silencing that was meticulously crafted in a variety of texts from this period across languages—Bengali, Hindi and Urdu. The word *stree*, meaning woman in both Hindi and Bengali, which featured in the titles of numerous journals and essays, never incorporated *dhye*, *naukranis* and *mehtaranees*. The past and the future of nation’s imagination did not go beyond the middle-class educated class of women. The fleeting imagery of servant appeared only as a mirroring device to underscore the plight of women. So, a critical comment on the current condition of the wife was explained in *Stri Darpan* (‘Woman’s Mirror’, a Hindi magazine) in 1917: ‘Like a slave or servant her [the woman’s] duty is limited to cooking, working on the grindstone and doing the dishes. She has neither the desire to progress, nor the energy.’<sup>89</sup> Wives being treated as *dasis*, the metonymic ploy of erasing the status difference, enabled the empowerment of the middle-class women both within the domestic and the political set-up but simultaneously also erased the female servants from the project of the new nation making.

There is, however, a second form of invocation of servants that tells us more about our own complicity in the erasure than those of the contemporary writers and publicists. Beyond the metonymic overlap, servants also stood as contrarian personhoods in these texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in defining two of the most important duties of the wife: the household management and

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*Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Shobna Nijhawan, *Periodical Literature in Colonial North India: Women and Girls in Hindi Public Sphere* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Shobna Nijhawan, ‘The Touchstone of a Nation’s Greatness is the Status of Its Women’—Responses to Colonial Discourses on Indian Womanhood’, *South Asia Research* 28, no. 1, 2008, 73–88.

<sup>87</sup> Sangari, ‘The Amenities’, 25.

<sup>88</sup> Be it Akbari and Asghari, the two sisters, of Nazir Ahmed’s *Mirat* or Gyano and Anandi (the sisters-in-law) of Gauridatt, *Devrani-Jethani*. See Lal, *Coming of Age*, ch. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Quote taken from Nijhawan, ‘The Touchstone’, 84 (emphasis added).

child rearing. 'Good' wives were those who did not leave their children to the care of wet nurses or maids lest they should be in bad company.<sup>90</sup> Our own historical agenda that is largely driven by understanding the politics of the making of the new modern class both among Hindus and Muslims overlooked both the subsumed-silenced and the visible-contrarian position of servants in these texts. Neither the *like-like* status nor the construction of the bad influence is fully explored independently on their own terms. The charge here is not that it is obligatory for all of us to talk about servants in whatever historical materials we use for writing a slice of social history. The argument is whether in the conceptualisation of the 'new ideal woman' or the 'new middle class', as expounded in a range of didactic texts, manuals and women journals, there existed a differentiated notion of woman based upon manual work.<sup>91</sup> Was naukrani's identity completely subsumed within the identity of her journal-reading mistress or did she stand separate, outside of this conceptualisation? Did the seclusionary ideology based on purdah and veil practised by *kulin* and *khandani* women work in the same way for women who went out to work as paid domestics?<sup>92</sup> When an upper-caste woman observed purdah in front of her father-in-law, we can surely detect the role of the

<sup>90</sup> Nijhawan, *Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*, 149; Mary Hancock, 'Home Science and the Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 4, 2001, 871–903.

<sup>91</sup> Banerjee has discursively done it for Bengal. Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity*.

<sup>92</sup> In some works, there are suggestions that there was a 'top-down' effect of upper-caste norms of purdah among middling and lower castes as a way of claiming upward social mobility. While this might be true, in this reconfiguration across caste and class, did the meaning of purdah itself change? Empirically also, at the same time when based upon women seclusion and respectability both in eastern and northern India (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) domesticity was getting created, the women from lower castes and classes were expanding into wage-based domestic work as part of that new domesticity. When advice manuals were written on *grihashthi* (domesticity) and *naari* (women), *mahris* were getting employed through 'service seeking agency', as mentioned in Premchand, *Mahri*. The overarching reach of the ideological construct needs to be recalibrated along the lines of who got to serve and who got served. A useful critique of overplaying the role of seclusionary ideology is Chitra Joshi, 'Between Work and Domesticity: Gender and Household Strategies in Working-Class Families', in *Workers in the Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History, 1800–2000*, eds Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd., 2005).



new ideology. When a lower-caste old female servant observed *sharm* and *lajja* with the married sons of the household, whom she had brought up, was it just based upon the ideology of the purdah or the reworked codes of master–servant relationship? When the mistress became servant-like in the discursive formation as propounded by *Stri Darpan*, what scope and strategies do we, as historians, have to reveal the modes that obfuscated the subjectivity of the servant which is now overtaken or occupied by the mistress? Similarly, when they are visible as a counter-subject position, why have we failed to write about them?

## Labour

The two-fold ideological construction of work and home, public and private, men and women had potential implications and ramifications for South Asian labour history writing. It has primarily remained devoted to writing about peasants and industrial workers. These groups constituted the main subaltern actors whose autonomy was discovered both in the realm of the consciousness and in that of politics. The terrain of the debate was not who constituted ‘labour’ but what explained their (lack of) being political to become or imitate the archetype of the politicised ‘working class’. The presentist concerns of the decades between the 1960s and the 1980s provided the context in which the historical questions of ‘absence’ were framed. The extension of this debate on the nature of the relationship between consciousness and politics soon dovetailed into a dispute between autonomy of culture versus the role of the state and capital.<sup>93</sup>

We feel that Indian labour history writing, in spite of its renewal or return, did not completely manage to shun the lingering effect of the centrality of the question that polarised the debates between ‘culture’ and ‘politics’. Labour was and continues to be a ‘self-evident’ category of

<sup>93</sup> This polarity got fossilised in ways Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar’s works became the staple of any subsequent review essays on labour history, the former representing the cultural aspects of the absence of the formation of archetypal working class, the latter explaining it through colonial capitalism and managerial strategies. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890 to 1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, 1850–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

‘productive’ work. The labourer’s history, and the way in which labour history accounts have been written, with its default unit of a male labourer standing in for a ‘gender-neutral’ category, came to hold the fulcrum of emancipatory politics. Like the ‘great man theory of history’, the worker (usually a man) rose like a phoenix, was exploited in factories, organised in trade unions, fought for better wages and working conditions, participated in strikes and later reminisced about his days of struggle, his triumphs and disappointments. The heroic struggle was stamped with the imprints of the ‘lost world’. Post liberalisation in the 1990s, arguably, labour ceased to be a relevant political category. The historiographical moment of renewal has recently been followed by another of return, to discover or reclaim the political valence of the category.<sup>94</sup>

The most recent addition to the thematic repertoire of Indian labour history writing is the contemporary informal sector, also referred to as the urban poor. With almost 90 per cent of the Indian labour force now categorised as ‘informal’, which includes domestic servants, this indeed is an important addition. However, there is a curious cyclical argument in the academic interest around this category. The divide between informal and formal has been repeatedly criticised, yet domestic as the site of paid labour somehow gets readily identified with the ‘informal’. If the divide does not really matter, then one wonders why in the South Asian case, in spite of almost 15 years of questioning the divide, most of the work on the informal sector is on certain publicly visible paid employment: truck and taxi drivers, construction workers, mall workers, hawkers, stone and quarry workers, security guards, and so on. While scholars have investigated the production of informality through the *privatisation* of regulation, the paid labour of domestic servants performed in private hardly became a subject of serious research in the expanding field of *histories* of ‘informal labour’.<sup>95</sup> There are, however, a few sociological,

<sup>94</sup> Ahuja, *Working Lives*.

<sup>95</sup> In some cases, there is a notion of ‘progressive decline’ from formal (industrial) to informal (self or home-based employment). Particularly, for female workers it is noted: their shrinking numbers in mines and factories is taken as an index of invisibilisation. A majority of labour historians are indeed aware that this gradual ‘informalisation’ went hand in hand with the numerical rise of women in the paid domestic sector, but somehow they have so far not conceptually integrated the domestic in the informal as part of the

economic and anthropological studies that have started placing domestic service into the fold of informality as a site of paid work.<sup>96</sup>

It seems that part of the reason for this cyclical slipup is the obscurity the word 'domestic' created for the historians. The domestic became the site of overt historical investigation but through the lens of 'recasting' of the women question, in which the woman-subject was the housewife. To put it provocatively, if nationalism danced to the tunes of imperialism in its derivative sense, this new and important historiographical intervention did the same in respect of middle-class reformists.<sup>97</sup> The labouring world of subalterns, on the other hand, remained preoccupied with peasants and workers. From a focus on the domesticity of the late nineteenth century to the informality of the post-Independence period, paid domestic labour was kept on the margins of the research agenda. As a result, the two strongest trends of history writing on nineteenth-century India, labour and socio-cultural, left servants outside the fold of domesticity and labour-subaltern.

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labour force. See Dilip Simeon, 'Calibrated Indifference: Understanding the Structure of Informal Labour in India', in *Workers in the Informal Sector*, 97–120. Chitra Joshi has questioned this assumed invisibilisation of women by tracing through interviews the multiple locations in the city in which women worked as breadwinners, post the decline in industrial job sector that led to the loss of jobs for both men and women. Joshi alerts us to the presence of women in small units of sandal-strap making, *bidi*-rolling and works involving tailoring and sewing. Surprisingly, none of the examples mention working as paid domestic maid/worker. Joshi, 'Between Work and Domesticity'. A recent Hindi movie, *Nil Battey Sannata*, in this regard, is extremely illuminating in which a single mother combines working as a maid in a household and as a worker in a small manufacturing unit as her household strategy to make sure that her school-going daughter deserves a 'better life'. In a telling encounter between the mother and the daughter, the latter, who being not as interested in the studies as her mother wished, retorted to the effect that she is a daughter of a maid and she would become a maid. The reformist effect of education has a powerful influence in the plot both for the mother and daughter.

<sup>96</sup> N. Neetha and Rajni Palriwala, 'The Absence of State Law: Domestic Workers in India', *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 23, no. 1, 2011, 97–120; N. Neetha, 'Contours of Domestic Service: Characteristics, Work Relations and Regulation', *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 52, no. 3, 2009, 489–506.

<sup>97</sup> It is rather surprising that an otherwise extremely insightful and thoughtful volume of essays on household, stretching from ancient times to the eighteenth century, has no paper on domestic servants. Kumkum Roy, ed., *Looking Within and Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent through Time (Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai)* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2015).

## Historians' Location

The most notable exception in bridging this link between gender and labour histories is Samita Sen, whose own trajectory of research beginning from historical work on female workers in the jute industry to the most recent on the contemporary domestic workers in Calcutta shows continuous engagement with gender and work that crosses the divide between factory and home, city and village, productive and reproductive, and not least, historical and contemporary.<sup>98</sup>

If Indian social historians, as they professed, were heavily influenced by Thompsonian ways of writing labour and social history, then perhaps predictably they genuinely failed to see domestic servants as valid claimants for inclusion within the labour category.<sup>99</sup> Our 'hunch' is that there is something more than the simple 'omission' which explains the oversight. Empirical awareness of the vastness of the domestic service economy came almost three decades ago when Nirmala Banerjee showed that in early twentieth-century Bengal, domestic service accounted for almost 70 per cent of the total female workforce in modern services, and particularly after

<sup>98</sup> Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Samita Sen, 'Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal', *International Review of Social History* 42, no. S5, 1997, 65–86; and subsequent series of articles on gender, domesticity and law in the context of Assam tea plantations are too well known to be summarised here. Certain omissions, as Sumit Sarkar noticed of E. P. Thompson's book (Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [New York: Vintage Books, 1966]) from the bibliography of Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's two books (*The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994] and *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*), become 'surprising'. So is Sarkar's own choice of writing the 'return of labour to South Asian history' in 2004 without engaging with Samita Sen's work. Sumit Sarkar, 'The Return of Labour to South-Asian History', *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3, 2004, 285–313. Sarkar has been one of the pioneering votaries of Thompsonian modes of writing social history in India and his choices or reflections on labour history indisputably carry 'weight'. Sen's framework does get well analysed a few years later by Chitra Joshi in her review article, 'Histories of Indian Labour: Predicaments and Possibilities', *History Compass* 6, no. 2, 2008, 439–54.

<sup>99</sup> For Steedman's critique of E. P. Thompson in not recognising the role of female domestic servants in the making of the English working class. See Steedman, *Labours Lost*.

1931 it became the most important sector of women employment outside of agriculture.<sup>100</sup> Again, for the early modern period, slave-based studies missed to conceptually decouple slaves and servants, although it must be acknowledged that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a well-rounded historical figure who either in early modern or modern times could be readily identified as domestic servant. The failure of different strands of historiography to make the servant a social-subaltern category of analysis, to locate paid domestic work in the households and use that service as a constituting element of social history existed as much as within the logic of history writing as also perhaps outside of it.

An off-the-cuff remark by one of the leading social historians of India is worth noting. According to Sumit Sarkar, even in many Victorian cities of England, domestic servants were entangled within ‘semi-feudal’ connections.<sup>101</sup> A recent sociological study using a framework that is critical of standard Marxian ways of history writing (Raymond Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’), on the so-called second capital of the British empire—Calcutta—also arrives at a fairly similar conclusion. Ray and Qayum argue for the mutual constitution of the master–servant subjectivities but claim they are formed in the interplay of modern and feudal imaginaries, the former representing the master/mistress worldview and the latter servants.<sup>102</sup> The modern stands for wage and contract whereas feudal represents the world of rural ties, loyalty and obligation. They both co-exist in the houses and flats of middle-class people, where having a servant is quite normal. In Sen’s words, ‘Domestic workers partake in a relationship that appears to be synchronous and anachronous to modernity and to the contemporary.’<sup>103</sup>

We might have issues with the ways Ray and Qayum flatten temporal epochs by bracketing, for instance, feudal and colonial, but if we stay with this big picture of the culture of servitude tied to the features of feudal forms of subordination, which has become an inseparable ‘informal’ part of the modern world as well, then we also need to understand

<sup>100</sup> Nirmala Banerjee, ‘Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalisation’, in *Recasting Women*, 278.

<sup>101</sup> Sarkar, ‘The Return of Labour’, 289.

<sup>102</sup> Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude*.

<sup>103</sup> Sen, ‘Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work’, 10.

the historians' own location and position in being able to discern this co-existence of apparent antithetical forms of status and hierarchical relationship. If the presence of servants reflects feudal or semi-feudal forms of social relationships, then what is the nature of the middle-class domestic set-up, where servants are conspicuous? This is an interesting methodological question.

Raising the issue of historians' location should not unsettle us. The Vietnam War and student protests of May 1968 are often invoked to explain the radical-populist turn of a generation of historians. The public-political has often remained an explanatory model or the elemental background context for explaining shifts in history writing.<sup>104</sup> Many British historians who have written on domestic service actually descended from domestic servants. Service was a lifecycle event for their mothers and grandmothers. With the disappearance of service by the mid-twentieth century, historians were perhaps better equipped to trace the past lineages of domestic service.<sup>105</sup> In the Indian case, when most of the history writing is still done by those who not only generationally but even in contemporary times belong to the servant-keeping class, what methodological constraints exist in writing the servants' pasts is a point to ponder upon.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>104</sup> The editors of the landmark volume on women history thus wrote that their need to understand the reconstitution of patriarchy emerged from their role as observers and participants in women's protest movement of the 1970s. Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*, 1.

<sup>105</sup> See Erickson, 'What Shall We Do about the Servants'.

<sup>106</sup> This difference was raised informally during our project's Berlin conference when Fae Dussart, Raffaella Sarti and Carolyn Steedman pointed it out: what does it mean for Indian academics to write on domestic servants when they also belong to the servant-keeping class? The way they put it was better worded and milder in disposition. From a different perspective, on the ways of doing comparative histories of domestic work done by servants, see Raffaella Sarti's contribution in this volume. An interesting contemporary account of the issues faced while working on domestic servants is narrated by Mary Romero. She says that often her colleagues, including feminists, reacted to her presentations as 'employers' and not researchers, meaning, these colleagues often brought out their claims of being benevolent towards servants in their homes. These colleagues' location of being an employer superseded that of an academician. Mary Romero, 'Immigration, the Servant Problem, and the Legacy of the Domestic Labor Debate: "Where Can You Find Good Help These Days!"', *University of Miami Law Review* 53, no. 4, 1999, 1047–48.

In her usual insightful way, speaking for urban India, Sen says that the complexity of the relationship in domestic service is the one of ‘tension between “domestic” and “worker” in the figure of the domestic worker’.<sup>107</sup> Are servants son-like or daughter-like, as the terms of fictive kinship go, or are they domestic workers? We could change the angle of this insight into asking questions about our own location and perhaps its unsaid influence on our practice of history writing. Can we, the historians, be free of the charge that we make towards our historical masters and mistresses of harbouring a ‘hidden script’? Are we absolved of devising strategies that camouflage the everyday differences or the subtleness or starkness of those differences that we impute to our historical and contemporary actors? To put it more bluntly, are we well equipped to write about ‘semi-feudal’ forms of servitude that we see practised among people like *us*? Social locations matter and this can be gleaned anecdotally. More than 80 per cent of the contributors in our project’s two conferences (held in Delhi and Berlin) were female. Domestic work is still seen as a research theme belonging to the domain of female social scientists and academics. In other words, labour history is still highly gendered: coolies and lascars belong to the domain of male historians, ayahs and servants to the female.<sup>108</sup>

When radical Marxists and Gramscian subalternists were able to see trade unions and their activities in factories and industries, why did they never turn their gaze towards households? Looking at households, we argue, would have denied any easy access to conceptual tools based on binaries, which has been the characteristic way of conceptualising industrial and labour history in India.<sup>109</sup> The new interventions have

<sup>107</sup> Sen, ‘Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work’, 10.

<sup>108</sup> This is a reflective argument and not one that can be backed by footnotes. We do know that the early study of domestic service in England, for instance, was done by J. Jean Hecht who was a male. But in the last few years a series of writings on domestic servants globally has been done mostly by female scholars. The panel on ‘Gender’ in a recently concluded prestigious conference, European Social Science History Congress, Belfast, 3–7 April 2018, was attended by three male scholars in a group of more than sixty in the room. The ‘fun’ exercise of head count was done by Nitin Sinha and Samita Sen, who attended the panel.

<sup>109</sup> A point aptly made by Sumit Sarkar, *Modern Times: India 1880s–1950s* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014), 217.

questioned this form of conceptualisation,<sup>110</sup> and our work on the domestic servant attempts to take the conversation further into the realm of the household, to explore the intersection of power, subjectivities, labour and emotion. By adopting a long-term perspective through collaborative exchanges with scholars working on different time periods and regions, we simultaneously also explicate the historical processes of the making of the terms and concepts such as household, domestic, private and, not least, public. Addressing both ends of the spectrum of historical investigation, that is, the existing glaring gaps in the historiography and simultaneously historicising the terms and concepts through which we write histories, we attempt to change the lineaments of not only labour history but, more broadly, of social history. The chapters in this volume and the subsequent volume will show how the practices of social differences along the lines of status and service, control and submission, are mapped through the histories of domestic service and the category of domestic servant.

A reflection on the form and constitution of the collective—us and they, masters and servants—is important. Domestic service in India has remained mainly familial and generational in terms of the absence of clear-cut indications of distinct lifecycle characteristic. In such a context, in both past as well as present, servants were and are often bundled into a collective. The Hindi term *naukarlog* and the Bengali term *kaajerlog* are testimonies to the sensibilities and practices of difference. Being modern requires distancing oneself from the seemingly exploitative practices of the past. Yet the South Asian middle-class dependence on servants is ubiquitous, as also attested by the mushrooming of new websites dedicated to finding servants. Are we then using language as a tool to create new layers of ‘hidden scripts’? From the simple word ‘servant’ we moved to using domestic help. Has the sanitisation of language also led to a change in service conditions? Or is this merely the *masterly* guilt that also explains why the history of domestic servants is still adequately missing from our accounts because it requires interrogating the familiar. Since we have returned to the question of terms and relationships, let us go back into the

<sup>110</sup> From among the writings of Indian labour historians, Samita Sen and Chitra Joshi have taken a lead in this.



past to see what meanings were embedded in various terms of domestic servitude and how they changed over time.

## LONG HISTORIES; GRADED PASTS; FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

This section seeks to provide an outline for a connected, though not a linear, account of the histories of domestic servants in the Indian subcontinent over the long duration from the earliest historical times to the colonial and contemporary periods. We do so by first looking at the range of terminologies relating to servitude, and by trying to delineate, in broadest possible strokes, the sense in which we deploy the category of the 'domestic servant' itself. This is followed by an attempt to locate the servants vis-à-vis abiding, if dynamic, structures of social hierarchisation like caste/varna as well as patriarchy and family/household. Interwoven with the histories of the institutions and structures are the shifting contexts of political philosophies, ethical commentaries and legal landscapes that shaped the practices of the master-servant relationships. The expressive modernist entity, the Rule of Law (as against 'law'), understood as a universally applicable entity through uniformity of procedures, becomes evident as a site of the formation of this relationship as well as its adjudication as we enter into the colonial period.<sup>111</sup> It is no surprise that

<sup>111</sup> See Tirthankar Roy and Anand V. Swamy, 'The Process of Legislation, 1772–1857', in *Law and the Economy in Colonial India*, eds Tirthankar Roy and Anand V. Swamy (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016). There were various legal enclaves in reality that hampered the abstract notion of uniformity. Muslim laws for criminal justice, personal Hindu and Muslim rules for civil cases, and British laws for British subjects added to which was the practical subversion due to racialism. See: Jörg Fisch, *Cheap Lives and Dear Limbs: The British Transformation of the Bengal Criminal Law 1769–1817* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 1983); Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and, Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Ironically, this 'Procrustean quality' of British attempt at uniformity meant the passing off of the legal plurality based upon social contexts of precolonial times on the one hand and clamping of the law as a universalising entity with the production of colonial sociology based upon religion and caste as part of the administration.

many essays in this and the forthcoming second volume have used judicial archives and court trials to tell the history of the servants. However, given the nature of the sources for the precolonial period, it is not easy to think about the domestic servants in a long time span extending from the Vedic period (1600 to 600 BC), when they are mentioned first, to the colonial and contemporary age in an area as vast as South Asia.

The first step towards coping with these difficulties, in our opinion, is to describe and understand these difficulties. A set of problems arise from very diverse lexical, taxonomic and hermeneutic registers once we set on to construct any neat and meaningful narrative about the nature of service relationships and the status of 'domestic servants'. The temporal, spatial, linguistic and thematic landscapes in which servants' pasts and histories of servitude are embedded are manifold.<sup>112</sup> We would be happy if we are able to map some of the more salient issues and frame the more pressing questions for the current as well as future research.

One way to start doing this is by acknowledging that there are hundreds, if not more, of words referring to 'servants' of various specific and generic categories in the numerous families of living, not 'fully living' and dead languages of the Indian subcontinent. Table II is an attempt not to provide a comprehensive glossary of these terms but only to take stock of the most commonly used lexical resources in the extant literary sources of the pre- and early-modern eras. As will be obvious, the table does not really solve any problem immediately. It may, however, help us gauge the specific nature of the problem.

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Fixed legal entities, in other words, became ways of understanding social relations. See Michael R. Anderson, 'Islamic Law and the Colonial Encounter in British India,' in *Institutions and Ideologies: A SOAS South Asia Reader*, eds David Arnold and Peter Robb (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1993), 165–85.

<sup>112</sup> These difficulties would have been even greater had it not been for a wholly unjustified bias in this volume in favour of north and western Indian regions as far as its spatial scope is concerned. On the other hand, we have quite ambitiously gone beyond the immediate temporal remit of the volume to make some sense of the early history not to instrumentally use the past as the 'background context' for early modern and modern periods but to mark the 'presence of the past', of course, with historically graded shifts.

**Table 1.1:** Terminologies for Relationships of Servitude<sup>113</sup>

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
<i>Dasa</i> (Female <i>dasi</i> )	Slave	Sanskrit/Pali/ Hindi and other north Indian dialects	From Rig Vedic times (1500 BC) till present times	In different periods and varied contexts, the word signified different character of servitude, including (a) one over whom the master's power was absolute and (b) the emancipatory connotation, as in, a person as a slave of God (divine bondage); (c) <i>dasi</i> would include claims on labour which are both physical and sexual.
<i>Kammaka</i> (Sanskrit: <i>Karmakara</i> )	Manual worker	Pali	Post- Vedic times (500 BC onwards)	One who provided manual labour service; usually a man of shudra varna.
Bhritya (Variations: <i>bhritak</i> )	Hired/paid servant (literally, one who is supported— from the root 'bhr' meaning sustenance, support, etc.	Sanskrit	Vedic times (circa 1500 BC onwards)	In its earliest usage, the word could signify all kinds of dependent service providers, including 'civil servants'. But from early centuries of Common Era, it signified a (meagrely) paid servant, usually attached to a householder. Probably the most common word for servant used in stories ( <i>Panchatantra</i> and <i>Hitopadesha</i> ), plays (Bhasa, Kalidasa, etc.), literary theory (Sahityadarpana, etc.) and law books/ <i>smriti</i> texts of Sanskrit.

<sup>113</sup> We have not included those terms in the table which carry specific occupational connotation but fall within the larger sense of a 'domestic servant'. Thus, *khanisaman* (cook) or a *mali* (gardener) were also domestic servants but we have not included them because there are thousands of such words for different occupational categories in different languages. Only words that signified, or came to signify, domestic servant generically have been taken up.

(contd)

(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
<i>Porisa</i>	Man	Pali (Sanskrit <i>purusha</i> )	Post-Vedic times, especially in Buddhist literature	Probably a man with no other social identity other than the fact that he was a male manual worker.
<i>Vishiti</i>	Unpaid labour	Sanskrit	More common in the post-Vedic, especially early medieval, times (sixth century onwards)	It is not clear if this signified only domestic labour or included labour in the fields. <i>Dharmashastras</i> (third century CE onwards) enjoined that the three upper varnas were entitled to <i>vishiti</i> on demand from the shudra castes, though the lived history of <i>vishiti</i> might have been more complex and varied.
<i>Chetah/Chetakah</i> (Female <i>Chetih</i> )	A servant assigned with a certain task	Sanskrit	Usage more common from early medieval times onwards	Origin from the Sanskrit root word 'chit', i.e. to send forth someone (on a specific task). This might be the origin also of the more common word (in north Indian dialects and in Persian) for a lowly novice or attendant—chela.
Shudra (Female <i>Shudri</i> )	The lowest of the varna, subsuming castes that were engaged in 'unclean' occupations.	Sanskrit and almost all Indic languages	Common from Rig Vedic times to the present	The word is notoriously varied in its usage and connotational variations though its 'originary' sense of a generic word for 'unclean' occupations never died out. The word is often used for anyone who is supposed to be unclean and beholden to the three upper varnas; slave; manual worker; person of low social status, etc. The twentieth century political radicalism challenged the stigma by politicising the position under the word Dalit.

(contd)

(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
Chakar	Male servant with particularly low status (the female Rajput dependents nonetheless referred themselves as chakar)	Unknown; probably of non-Sanskrit Indic origin	Found from thirteenth century onwards, but common only from fifteenth century	Often used with the most common medieval word in north India for servant, i.e., <i>naukar</i> as in <i>naukar</i> -chakar to refer collectively to the group of servants. Until the early nineteenth century, distinction was made between <i>naukar</i> and chakar; gradually, it became an ornamental rhyming word in north India and synonymous with <i>naukar</i> in eastern India. Within this group, there were listed almost 18–20 servants/service providers.
<i>Naukar</i> (Female <i>naukarani</i> )	Servant	Persian; Probably of Mongolian origin (from <i>nokod</i> )	Common in almost all Indic languages from sixteenth century	Generic word today in almost entire South Asia for servant. It is commonly used as a derogatory term but it can also refer to very high and respectable occupational categories, as in <i>sarkari naukari</i> (government servant), and <i>naukarshah</i> (literally, the kingly servants) meaning civil servant. The noun form, <i>naukri</i> , is used broadly for salaried employment but with historical meaning of clerical drudgery in the nineteenth century. Even before that, between the early modern period and early nineteenth century, it was used for 'respectable' service, or for servants of the upper group, such as scribes and stewards. The early nineteenth-century British sources counted at least eight to ten sub-categories within it. The usage of the female form of the word seems to have become popular in modern times.

(contd)

(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
<i>Khawas</i> (Female <i>khawasin</i> )	Literally, 'special'; personal attendant	From Persian <i>Khas-bar-dar</i> , meaning a servant who carries the betel- box for a great man especially on a ceremonial occasion; a word common among many new Indo- Aryan languages	In usage probably from the fourteenth century but common only from the eighteenth century.	Most of its reference comes from modern literatures in north Indian languages where it is used for personal attendants/assistants of landed magnates, especially when the latter were travelling/visiting other dignitaries or households.
<i>Chhora</i> / <i>Chhokra</i> (Female <i>Chhori</i> / <i>Chhokri</i> )	Young boy, lad	Urdu/ Hindustani/ New Indo-Aryan (NIA) languages. The origin can also be in military labour.	Found in use probably from fifteenth century but common in the context of an errand- running boy from eighteenth century.	Besides household, also used chiefly in military cantonments and army.
<i>Ghulam</i>	Slave; servant; a page of the royal household	Persian; of Arabic origin	Usage common in the Subcontinent from twelfth century onwards	Originally, the word referred to young boys taken captive or purchased as slaves. One connotation is that of a boy who is just beginning to grow a moustache. Probably sexual favours were also expected/taken from the <i>ghulams</i> by their masters as the compound word ' <i>ghulam-karagi</i> ' in Persian meant pederasty.

(contd)

(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
<i>Banda</i> (Female <i>bandi</i> )	(Literally, chained/ fastened/bound) Servant, slave, domestic	Persian	Common in the Subcontinent since the time that Persian acquired a foothold, i.e., twelfth century onwards.	Like the Sanskrit <i>dasa</i> , <i>banda</i> too has been used as a generic word both in the derogatory sense as well as (especially in literary texts) in signifying the spiritually emancipatory potential of bondage when the master is none other than God himself.
<i>Khidmutgar</i>	Servant/a serving man	Persian, from Arabic <i>Khidmat</i> , i.e., service/ employment	Common in the Subcontinent since the time Persian acquired a foothold, i.e. twelfth century onwards.	Another word that refers to servitude both within as well as outside the household. The meaning changed in the nineteenth century, at least in European households, from being a personal to a table attendant. Otherwise, it retained the meaning of being a valet.
<i>Launda</i> (Female <i>laundi</i> )	A laddie/boy	Urdu	In usage found from seventeenth century, but common from late eighteenth century onwards, referring to a servant boy most 'suitable' for running errands/ household chores	Probably signified the lowly status of the servant as he was supposed to be in possession of indeterminate skill.

(contd)

(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
<i>Ayah</i>	A maid-servant	Anglo-Indian (of Portuguese origin; from <i>aia</i> , literally nurse, feminine of <i>aio</i> , tutor/governor of a young noble)	Known from seventeenth century but probably in common usage only from the eighteenth century	A lady's-maid or nurse-maid in European households of India. The word was later incorporated into several Indian languages in the varied forms of <i>aya</i> .
<i>Chela</i>	Disciple/apprentice/assistant	Origin unknown	Most commonly used in the Nathpanthi literatures	This word appears in very varied and interesting contexts during the Mughal period in the Persian <i>tarikhs</i> and <i>tazkiras</i> . In the famous elite spiritual clique of Akbar, those who joined the group as the emperor's disciples were called <i>chelas</i> . The term was also used for young boys in hijra households in the nineteenth century.
<i>Presnya</i>	Errand boy	Sanskrit	Known from the later Vedic period but commonly used in the Sanskrit law codes like <i>Manusmṛiti</i>	This was one of the ideal professions for the <i>śhūdras</i> , according to <i>Manusmṛiti</i> <sup>114</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Chitra Upadhyaya Tiwari, *Sūdras in Manu* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), 32.

(contd)



(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
Kanizak /kaniz	A girl/virgin /female slave /maid-servant /mistress	Persian, but cognate with the Sanskrit word <i>kanya</i> , also meaning a young girl	In usage since the time that Persian was introduced in India	It is interesting that <i>kanizak/kaniz</i> may mean a female slave, a mistress as well as a maid-servant. This jumbling in meaning is probably a reflection of the fact that these distinctions were known but not always respected.
<i>Mulazim</i>	Attendant (literally, one who is attached steadfastly)	Persian	Goes back to antiquity; shifts in connotation too subtle and contingent to account for here	Used both for a subordinate worker (especially from Mughal times) as well as personal assistant/ attendant.
<i>Ajir</i> (opposite of <i>Mustajir</i> , i.e. employer)	Workman; dayworker (literally, hireling)	Persian; both <i>ajir</i> and <i>mustajir</i> are cognate with <i>ijara</i> , contract.	Used throughout the 'Muslim' period	Most commonly found in the legal treatises.
<i>Abd</i> (plural, <i>abad</i> )	Slave servant (literally, a legally bonded person)	Persian word of Arabic origin	The word is used throughout the medieval period but not very frequently.	The present authors could not trace a pattern of usage.

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(Table II continued)

Word	Meaning	Language	Period	Comments
<i>Davri</i>	A female attendant	Marwari; might have originated from the Persian word <i>dauri</i> , meaning a tray/salver on account of the fact that attendants were also expected to serve the masters in a tray.	Commonly used during the Mughal period in the Rajput households	Davris were mostly employed in the women's quarters as attendants of the queens, mistresses and concubines, and paid in cash during the sixteenth–nineteenth centuries.
<i>Pardayat</i> , <i>paswan</i>	Concubine	Rajasthani	Found from fourteenth century onwards but common only from sixteenth century	<p>The term <i>pardayat</i> is composed of the root words <i>parda</i> (veil) and <i>yat</i> (within), thus meaning 'within the veil', implying that the woman was taken in the protection by the ruler.</p> <p>The term <i>paswan</i> is derived from the word <i>pas</i> (to be close) and the prepositional suffix <i>wan</i> (to), implying 'close to' or an 'intimate' companion to the master.</p> <p>Both titles indicated the concubinage status of women from inferior ranked castes, who were in relationship with their masters.</p>

## Domestic Servant and Household

The information compiled in Table I1 comes from extremely diverse linguistic and epistemological contexts. A simple familiarity with the dictionary meaning of the words or even their etymology can only be the beginning of an attempt to comprehend the shifts in ideals and practices of servitude over the long duration in various regions and communities, and within distinct literary ecumenes.

So, who is a 'domestic servant'? Lest anyone should think this question to be superfluous, it is important to remember that systems of classification based on normative understanding of freedom and bondage, institutional practices of caste and impurity, gender divisions between male and female (and in early modern also the third gender), spatial boundaries between rural and urban, and legal proceedings delineating public and private have recurrently defined the boundaries of social and labouring distinctions between master/mistress and servant. The classification-defying historical variety of service providers who might qualify to be called a servant was immensely ambiguous and mystifyingly graded: the *dasa* of the Buddhist Pali texts (Uma Chakravarti) who could be legitimately killed by his master; the *shudra* who was to be purchased for a paltry sum in the fifteenth century and charged with all tasks related to cows in the cow-pen of the master as well as those not related to the cows (Pankaj Jha); the *bhritya* of ancient Sanskrit stories from *Panchatantra* tales who were expected to be integrated with the householders' families within a prescribed socio-emotional regime (see below); the *davris* serving the princely households of Jodhpur (Geetanjali Tyagi); the *ajir* who had to abide by the conditions of his 'employment' during the Mughal period (Sajjad Alam Rizvi); the concubines who 'served' in the Rajput households as captive companions of the princes as also those who serviced the concubines' 'independent' establishments in various capacities (Priyanka Khanna); the cooks who prepared the sumptuous meals for the Mughal royal household; the *ayahs* in the European households of colonial India; and many more such dispersed classes of service providers—whether paid, under-paid, paid by the hour, paid only notionally or entirely unpaid.

To come back to the question of definition, we start with the acknowledgement that we deploy the word 'servant' as an etic

term.<sup>115</sup> In its historical-philological trajectory, the word carried such wide and varied connotations that it becomes necessary, if this word is to serve any meaningful hermeneutic purpose at all, to prise it open and examine its various meanings in a context-specific sense. A civil servant or a public servant, for example, is a category that we must leave out of our concern since our interest is confined to the category of the 'domestic servant'. The word 'domestic' denotes a sphere that is related to the categories of the family and the household but not synonymous with either of them. Sociologists make a useful distinction between the family and the household. A family includes 'the extended kinship network of all persons related by marriage, birth or adoption while household is used to define the smaller unit of persons living in the same domicile.'<sup>116</sup> The household might even include unrelated individuals such as personal attendants, regular service providers and servants. It would appear that these distinctions would hold true, on a very broad note, in most periods of the South Asian history too.

The category of 'domestic' comes closer in meaning to the household than to the family, with the caveat that it is not coextensive with, and goes beyond the physical confines of, the household. Thus, a Mughal noble's personal attendant (khawas) who would accompany his master on his tours of distant places for months together, sometimes years, would still be a 'domestic servant'. One, because of the fact that the master-servant ties were personal, which moved along with the itinerant bodies of the master and servant; second, because the notion of the household also, at least in this period, was not defined in a strict sense to a static 'domiciled abode'. Similarly, a *dasa* who was bought by an affluent client 'through due procedures' (see the chapter by Pankaj Jha in this volume) and was charged with all tasks, including work in the agricultural fields of his master, would fall in the category of the 'domestic servant' even though s/he worked outside of the house. The 'house' (as in the 'householder') in the

<sup>115</sup> At one level, all words are emic words. However, at certain historical junctures, scholars *decide* to deploy certain words as etic words because they reckon that those words have come to escape out of their specific cultural contexts and be used as generic words. Also see Raffaella Sarti's Interjection in this volume.

<sup>116</sup> Shirley Carlson, 'Family and Household in a Black Community in Southern Illinois', *International Journal of the Sociology of the Family* 18, no. 2, 1988, 203–04.

pre-modern Indic context might refer both to the princely establishment as well as the familial abode of the ordinary peasant proprietor including his holdings in land, orchard and cow-pens. But in the extant literature of any of the Indic languages, it rarely referred to the house of the (usually lower-caste) servant who was himself attached to or dependent on his socially and economically 'superior' master. Even a text like *Shudrahnikam* (early seventeenth century), devoted to prescribing the ideal conduct of the shudras, used the word *kutumb*, not to refer to the shudra's own house/family but to the family of his employer. It was with reference to the latter that the *dasa* was expected to perform the requisite rituals for his deceased ancestors.<sup>117</sup>

### Temporal and Literary Contexts: Early India

It is tempting to attempt a chronologically linear account of the history of the domestic servant from the recorded past, even 'remembered', to the present. However, whatever little we know of this history does not allow us, nor does it even make it desirable, to do so. Our sparse knowledge, at least in parts, is due to the historiographical interventions as noted in the preceding sections, which assumed that either servants' histories could legitimately be left out or these histories could be subsumed under other theoretically pre-given overlapping categories of workers, peasants, serfs, slaves, concubines and wives. The information available for domestic servants, on the other hand, is couched in specific linguistic/literary templates across long durations whereas within a synchronous context, that is, in a given time period, the accounts available in different languages do not seem to speak to each other, even though it is possible to relate them. Seen from this perspective, it becomes methodologically significant to look at the servitude-related terminologies in their particular philological contexts.

We are familiar with the (in)famous *purushasukta* hymn of the later part of Rig Veda that described the origin of the four varnas from different body parts of the primal man and wherein the shudras were thought to be born out of his feet. Later Vedic texts referred to the idea, and the *dharmashastras* from the early centuries of Common Era enjoined that it

<sup>117</sup> Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa, *Śūdrāhnikam*, ed. Kaushal Panwar (Delhi: Vidyavidhi Prakashan, 2010), 57.

was the duty (*dharma*) of the shudras to serve the three upper varnas. This did not mean that the shudras could not indulge in specific occupations like tilling land, making baskets, weaving, catching fish, sailing boats, laundry, pottery-making, needle-work and other crafts (*shilpani vividhani*), and certain kinds of trading activities (e.g. selling meat, salt, lac, milk).<sup>118</sup> Rather, it implied that whatever profession they followed, their primary purpose in living was to make life easier for the three upper varnas. In fact, *Manusmriti*, compiled sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era, suggested that the king should make a shudra poor, *nirdhanam kritva*, and exile him if he engaged in (earning) a livelihood usually reserved for one of the three castes.<sup>119</sup>

Within the Sanskrit ecumene of law books (*dharmashastras*) and Puranic tales, such ideals and sentiments continued to be reiterated almost in identical words until the eighteenth century. Yet, it is possible to locate the shifts taking place in terms of occupational diversity and labour forms and the historical dynamism of the *chaturvarna* order if one pays attention to the epigraphic records of the early (post-Mauryan period) and early medieval (seventh to twelfth centuries) periods. It was during this time span that hundreds of (at least notionally) occupational categories of caste were created and subsumed within the four-fold division. From a few dozens of castes that we get reference to in the later Vedic period and its immediate aftermath, the early medieval period witnessed a rapid proliferation of castes, counting to a few thousands, mostly within the lowest varna.<sup>120</sup> R. S. Sharma, who wrote a detailed account of these developments, mainly on the basis of a study of land grants available in the contemporary copper plate inscriptions, also saw it as part of brahmanisation on the one hand and state formation on the other. Is it possible to relate these epigraph-based records of occupational variety with the dharmashastiric injunctions about the shudras' calling? It would appear that the landless workers of early medieval era were

<sup>118</sup> See Tiwari, *Sudras in Manu*, 30–36.

<sup>119</sup> See Manu, *Manu's Code of Law*, X, 96. One may note here that *Manusmriti* was the most cited of all *dharmashastras* not only in later compilations of the same genre but also in texts on *niti*, political ethics.

<sup>120</sup> Ram Sharan Sharma, *Social Changes in Early Medieval India circa A.D. 500–1200*, Devaraj Chanana Memorial Lecture 1 (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969).

probably seen as the servants of their landowning (upper-varna) masters. Sharma inferred that they were in a state of immobilised subjection to the beneficiary of the land grants. However, since he was more interested in showing this political economy as 'feudal', he thought of this class as 'serfs' (or akin to them) whose surplus produce was skimmed off through extra-economic methods.

The land grants that he surveyed, which constituted his chief basis for the application of the 'feudalism model' in the north Indian context, did refer to rights over the serving groups often being transferred along with land to the beneficiaries. However, these land grants only occasionally specified the precise function that the transferred work forces were expected to perform. Among those who were transferred with fiscal and administrative rights included occupational groups such as fishermen, boatmen, potters and basket-makers.<sup>121</sup> If the literary compositions of the period are to be taken into account, it would appear that a significant number of the working people transferred with the land grants to the recipients (mostly temples, brahmins and *samantas* [landed chiefs; literally the word also has the sense of 'one on the frontiers']) were probably in the category of what we might call 'servants'. In fact, it is possible to argue that as far as the unpaid labour (*vishti*) during the early historical period in India is concerned, most of it might have been confined to the domestic domain of the *grihastha*, that is, the landowning householder.<sup>122</sup> Exactly what were the tasks assigned to the domestic servants at this point of time, however, is not clear. Indeed, it is very likely that their functions were not defined in any restrictive manner whatsoever. Irrespective of the position one might take on the debates surrounding the prevalence (or not) of feudal social formation at this time, it is evident that land grants were also,

<sup>121</sup> See M. G. Dikshit, *Selected Inscriptions from Maharashtra (Fifth to the Twelfth Century A.D.)* (Pune: n.p., 1947); M. G. Dikshit, ed., *Sources of the Mediaeval History of the Deccan*, vol. 4 (Pune: n.p., 1951); Nani Gopal Majumdar, ed., *Inscriptions of Bengal*, vol. 3 (Rajshahi: The Varendra Research Society, 1929); Raj Bali Pandey, *Historical and Literary Inscriptions* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1962); Devendrakumar Rajaram Patil, *The Antiquarian Remains in Bihar* (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1963).

<sup>122</sup> Harbans Mukhia, 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 8, no. 3, 1981, 273–310.

among other things, a means of creating a more effective mechanism for controlling labour within a social-ideological matrix.

Two additional points emerge from the above discussion: first, it certainly helped the recipients of the grants because the tasks of the transferred labour force were seldom specified. Thus, the extent to which any in-built limits to exploitation existed was undefined or simply absent. This, in effect, meant that the lower varna working groups would have to negotiate their position (or limits of their exploitation) entirely on their own vis-à-vis the far more prosperous and powerful landholders. Second, since individual workmen were rarely mentioned in the land grants when transferred to the beneficiaries, it may safely be inferred that whole communities of service providers or (at the least) the entire families of occupational groups were handed over.

Let us step back from the epigraphs and look into the parallel genre of literary and political treatises within the world of Sanskrit. It is probably much more than just a testimony to the importance and ubiquity of the servants that even texts on political ethics like the *Panchatantra*, compiled circa second century of the Common Era, found it pertinent to go into details of how the servants should be employed, deployed and treated. It laid out the expectations from the servants in an interesting but stylised manner. The word used was *bhritya*, occasionally *sevak*, and the author acknowledged the symbiosis of the relationship between the master and the servant. But the relation of power was starkly and unapologetically asymmetrical. Although the precise tasks of the servants were not defined, the author made it clear that their deployment had to be done carefully:

Ornaments and servants one should employ,  
Only in their rightful spots.  
For do you wear a crest jewel on your foot,  
Simply to show that you can?<sup>123</sup>

The master was exhorted to be careful while making a hierarchy among them:

Ranking them with those inferior to them,  
Not giving the respect their peers receive.

<sup>123</sup> See *Pancatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom*, tr. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.



And assigning them to unworthy tasks,  
For these three reasons servants quit their lords.<sup>124</sup>

A wise jackal named Damanak continued to impress upon his king thus:

We...Your Majesty's hereditary servants,  
We follow you even in times of misfortune.

Whether they become capable or not,  
Depends on the competence of the man,  
To whom they belong.

It is certainly not a hard and fast rule,  
That a servant who is born in one's own house,  
Who's been around a long time, always makes,  
A better and a loyal minister.<sup>125</sup>

The passage cited above is a conversation between a minister (jackal) and a king (lion). It is in the form of a parable but it ostensibly seeks to reflect on the larger issue of the master-servant relationship rather than just the relationship of a king with his ministers. The aforementioned musings follow right after the story of 'the monkey who pulled the wedge' and are spread across more than two dozen of couplets along with numerous wisecracks on the issue of servants' duties, skills and loyalty in the prose that intersperse the verses.<sup>126</sup> Two things stand out in these musings, including the series of couplets that weave a veritable discourse on the master-servant relationships. First, the issues of interdependence (between the master and the servant) and loyalty (of the servant towards the master) are the recurring themes in this discourse. Second, the varied contexts in which the conversations between the two jackals of 'ministerial stock' develop suggest that the reference to the servant (*bhritya*) steers clear of making any distinction between the personal attendants of ordinary householders on the one hand and the high ranking servants (including ministers) of the king on the other. In other words, as far as the author of *Panchatantra* was concerned, the same rules of interdependence, discretion in deployment, necessity of steadfast loyalty on the part of the servant,

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 8-16.

and so forth, were applicable across the entire spectrum of master–servant relationships whether within the context of a king, royal palace or ordinary household. After all, *Panchatantra* itself was a text on political ethics, *niṭi*, which would have attempted to create a uniform moral setting of the relationship for everyone.

To come back to the dynamism of the varna/caste order, the vertical and horizontal mobility of the serving classes is most dramatically indexed by the several ruling houses belonging to the shudra castes, not the least of them being the Maurya dynasty; yet the more ubiquitous case of the humbler mobility of a number of occupational groups, especially peasants and artisans, as documented through epigraphic sources by R. S. Sharma, is equally significant.<sup>127</sup>

How the working majorities, and especially women among them, might have tried to negotiate whatever little breathing space they could for themselves is, however, accessible only in the Pali Buddhist texts or Prakrit and Sanskrit literary compositions of the ancient and early medieval India (see Uma Chakravarti's Interjection in this volume). There are equally interesting instances of smart negotiation on the part of the servants found in *Kathasaritsagar*, the Sanskrit 'translation' by Somadeva (eleventh century) of the apparently ancient collection of Prakrit stories, *Brihatkatha*, compiled allegedly by Gunadhya.<sup>128</sup>

One such story is about a king named Chiradatri (literally, the Eternal Giver), who was a good king but whose family members and ministers were evil-minded. As a result, his servants never got their remuneration

<sup>127</sup> Sharma, *Social Changes in Early Medieval India*. For an interesting discussion of the context for these social changes and the peculiarities of the epigraphic sources, see Ram Sharan Sharma, 'An Analysis of Land Grants and Their Value for Economic History', in *Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India*, ed. Ram Sharan Sharma, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995), 272–81.

<sup>128</sup> A recent work suggests, rather persuasively, that the Prakrit *Brihatkatha* might never have been compiled and it is more likely that it was something of a notional entity signifying all stories available in the popular domain and woven together in a single narrative. See Andrew Ollett, 'Ghosts from the Past: India's Undead Languages', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 4, 2014, 405–56. The distinction is important because if this is true, it would also mean that the stories belong to the age of the 'translations' rather than to the time when *Brihatkatha* was supposed to have been compiled.

in time. One of them, named Prasanga (literally, Context), and two of his colleagues had not received their salary for five years. Because of the machinations of the ministers, they never got a chance to broach the subject directly with the king. One day, the king's son passed away. Prasanga and his two associates saw the king sitting and quietly mourning while his ministers stood silently around him. Prasanga indicated to his associates that this was the right moment to talk about their (unpaid) wages. Though they warned him against it, he went ahead and told the king in a mournful tone that they were serving his majesty for years, even though he did not pay them anything. They lived in the hope that the prince would surely pay them one day. However, now that the prince had passed away, they should be allowed to leave. The king was moved and immediately ordered full payment of all dues to the servants.<sup>129</sup>

Admittedly, not too many stories of this kind are found even in the literary texts. The folk tales in the oral traditions, where one might expect them, have a problem of dating. Considering that many of these tales do gesture to a certain moment in the development of civilisation, even as they tell tales with universalising tropes of wit and stupidity, miserliness and generosity, or exploitation and resistance, they might fruitfully be used by historians within more fluid frames of dense time. Take the story of Punia, heard in Rajasthan by Komal Kothari who narrated it in an interview to Rustam Bharucha.<sup>130</sup> As Kothari reported, such stories were narrated by professional story-tellers and genealogists (of lower varnas) alongside acts of acrobatic performance (such bards and story-tellers had a long history of recording pasts through story-telling; see Geetanjali Tyagi's chapter in this volume). The story opened with the remark that no agriculture was practised before Punia sowed, for the first time, a crop of maize. When the crop was ready for harvest, the sun and the moon arrived. Claiming that the crop could not have ripened without them, they demanded a share. Punia agreed and asked them to take their share. The duo decided to take away the top part of the plants but because maize grows on the middle part,

<sup>129</sup> Somadeva, *Kathasaritsagar or Ocean of the Streams of Story*, tr. C. H. Tawney, vol. 1 (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992), 537–38.

<sup>130</sup> This transpired in Pipalia village near Chhoti Sadari in Mewar, Rajasthan. See Rustam Bharucha, 'The Past in the Present', in *Cultural History of Modern India*, ed. Dilip M. Menon, 2nd edn (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2017), 66–82.

the stems of the plant, the duo actually got nothing while Punia cut a rich harvest. Next year, Punia decided to grow *jawar* (sorghum) and his crop was abundant. The two celestial beings came and demanded their share again. Having got nothing the last time, they insisted on taking the lower part of the plants this time. Since *jawar* grows on top, Punia still managed to cut a rich harvest. Interestingly, at the end of this story, the narrator asked the audience if they could identify who the sun and the moon were. And all of them said in unison, *Chandravanshi* and *Suryavanshi* respectively, in an obvious reference to the landlord community belonging to the Rajput castes who claimed their lineages from the moon (*chandravanshi*) and the sun (*suryavanshi*). Clearly, what we find in stories like these is the wilful inversion of the dominant narrative about the superiority of the landed householders and the moronic naiveté of the ‘servile’ working groups.

This ‘breathing space’, or what Uma Chakravarti would define as moments of agency and resistance, is always written in the Sanskrit literary corpus through the trope of the grace of the brahmins. Thus, Vishakhadatta (tenth century) in his play *Mudrarakshasa* immortalised the story of Chanakya picking up a *vrishala* (shudra), Chandragupta, the future founder of the Maurya dynasty, from nowhere and turning him into a *chakravartin samrata*, universal king, an incident for which we have almost no verifiable contemporary source.<sup>131</sup> To put it differently, the historical disjunctions notwithstanding, the ideal of the shudra castes finding their true calling in being dependent on the grace of the superior varnas for their salvation as well as for their worldly survival was kept aloft in the prescriptive texts as well as the mytho-epic tales of the ancient and the medieval periods.

Indeed, for the pre-modern period, tales and stories best depict the textures of relationship.<sup>132</sup> It would be pertinent to recount another such

<sup>131</sup> Almost identical sentiments were expressed in the fifteenth century in one of the stories in the Sanskrit treatise entitled *Purushapariksha*. See Pankaj Jha, ‘Beyond the Local and the Universal: Exclusionary Strategies of Expansive Literary Cultures in Fifteenth Century Mithila’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 1, 2014, 1–40.

<sup>132</sup> In some senses, this is true even for the modern period as argued in the first section of the introduction that it is expressive literature that allows us to see varied registers of the master–servant relationship in comparison to state documents.

tale here. Mahabharata, arguably the most popular epic story of all times in the Sanskrit-Indic traditions, tells the story of King Vichitravirya (literally, one with bizarre semen) of Hastinapura who died childless, leaving behind two widowed queens, Ambika and Ambalika. Anxious to have an heir to the throne, his mother Satyawati called upon Sage Vyasa, a fearsome-looking ascetic, to help the queens produce male scions. However, Ambika closed her eyes in fear when she came in the presence of Vyasa and Ambalika went pale after she saw him. Vyasa informed the old queen that the two sons would be blind (the future Dhritarashtra) and jaundiced (the future Pandu) respectively. However, the queen wanted a healthy heir at any cost and asked Ambika to see Vyasa again. Out of fear, Ambika forced her *dasi*, who was not scared of Vyasa, to go to him. Thus was born Vidur (literally, the learned one). The story is interesting, among other things, because the narrative takes it for granted that the mistress Ambika could rightfully order her maid to produce a child with a stranger. Equally telling is the fact that the possibility of the only healthy and extraordinarily wise and learned man Vidur becoming king simply did not arise on account of the fact that he was born of a *dasi*. As the story of the Mahabharata unfolded, he came to be treated as the wisest of the minister/counsellor but was often addressed with the epithet *dasiputra* (son of the *dasi*).

We have recounted tales ranging from the early historical period to those of the early colonial. We have recounted them as they were composed and disseminated in different languages, varied genres and diverse contexts. We have picked up examples of contemporaneous retellings of such tales from a range of temporal settings in the past. What do they signify? They gesture towards an embedded cyclicality of references and tropes that articulated (sometimes explained) the specific character of the master–servant relationships. They point towards the long histories of such relationships. A text written or compiled in the fifteenth century could freely pick up an incident or a tale from the past and re-deploy it within its own temporality. This does not make these tales ahistorical or the master–servant relationship unchanging. In the early medieval times,

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However, issues of resistance and clever negotiations are found in other sources too in the modern period.

as noted above, castes proliferated rapidly and so did the land-based attachment of the transferred working force, servile communities and occupational-caste groups. Literary sources, as suggested above, when seen in dialogue with epigraphic, for instance, allow the mapping of the relationship at both institutional (economic subjugation) as well as social levels through the reading of the codes of desirable functions, on the one hand, and boundaries, practices and possibilities of inversions on the other.

## The Persianate World of Medieval and Early Modern

It is only with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate early in the thirteenth century and the advent of the Persian literature that the nature of available information about the forms of subjection starts changing.<sup>133</sup> This poses a different set of methodological issues for the historians, especially those interested in writing histories of forms of subjection. The most visible form of subjection that comes to notice in the Persianate literatures from thirteenth century onwards is slavery, especially what somewhat misleadingly came to be regarded as ‘elite slavery’ as those who rose to become nobles and sultans themselves emerged from a system of deploying slaves in menial tasks. Through this process, very few, based on loyalty and competence, rose to the higher positions.<sup>134</sup> It is, however, equally pertinent to observe that the subsequent historiography has remained largely focused on these slave-sultans, thus obscuring the social history of those who remained in the position of menials.

Before proceeding, however, we must note two important points. One, the specific literature detailing the codes and conditions of slavery becomes available from the thirteenth century in India, especially in the Persianate-Islamic traditions, but it is equally true that slavery was not introduced in India during this time. Men and women selling themselves, or (more commonly) being sold by others, was known and practised in the Subcontinent at least since the post-Vedic times. The references to

<sup>133</sup> Part of the reason for this change was the fact that genres like *tarikh*, *tabaqat* and *tazkira* in the Persian tradition carried the historical sensibilities of the age in the more direct form of reportage, rather than the more decorative, if entertaining, form of the *itihas puranas*, in which much of the historical literature in Sanskrit was couched.

<sup>134</sup> See Sunil Kumar, ‘When Slaves were Nobles: The *Shamsi bandagān* in the Early Delhi Sultanate’, *Studies in History* 10, no. 1, 1994, 23–52.

these practices, however, are only incidentally available to us, not because these were not common, but because reports of such transactions were often embedded within other more 'stylised' forms (or stylised narratives of forms of subjection such as tales, riddles and epics) of subjection vis-à-vis caste/varna regimes. The fact that the *dharmashastras* mention *dasa* (slave) and *preshya*/bhritya (errand boy/servant) separately indicates that a distinction was made between legally defined unfree status of a person and the occupation of a personal attendant or servant.<sup>135</sup> Numerous stories in the epics, Puranas and in the *Kathasaritsagar* casually refer to men and women being sold for material gain, gifted in dowry or donation, or lost in bets either individually or in groups.<sup>136</sup>

Although the practice of slavery must have complemented and reinforced caste discriminations, one must make a distinction between the two. It is not difficult to see that some forms of social subjection even of 'free subjects' could be worse than legal slavery. Yet it appears to be empirically and theoretically difficult to sustain the argument that caste subjections can be studied only within the bounds of slavery.<sup>137</sup> Second, we must factor in that whereas *varna/jati* provided the conventional template in Sanskrit and other Indic literary traditions to talk about different forms of subjection, this was not the case with Persian literary traditions. Rather, there was a long history of writing about *ghulams* and *bandagan* in the Persian tradition, among other things, primarily because several of them (the slaves) turned out to be extremely powerful with the charge to command affluent and free men. Read without regard to these literary conventions and political contexts, the Persian chronicles of Delhi Sultanate might create the impression that Muslims introduced slavery in India.

<sup>135</sup> Tiwari, *Sudras in Manu*, 64.

<sup>136</sup> Thus, a *vanij* called Arthalobh sold his wife in a story in *Kathasaritsagar*, whereas in the same collection is the story of Naravahanadatta and Karpurika in which the father of Karpurika marries her off to Naravahanadatta and gifts him 300 female slaves, *dasis*. See Somadeva, *Kathasaritsagar*, 1: 393–94, 400. The Mahabharata and Puranic stories are too well known to be recounted here.

<sup>137</sup> A recent work on Kerala seeks to study modern forms of slavery and its mutually reinforcing relationship with caste-based subjection together by using the category of 'caste slavery' in an interesting manner, without giving up the distinction between the two. See P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

One reason why a number of historians studied elite slavery in great detail was the fact that it was a necessary concomitant to the study of the making of the Sultanate itself. For, herein was a spectacular case of slaves turning into 'nobles', or at any rate becoming sultans and top power-wielders precisely because they were slaves.<sup>138</sup> Those who established the Delhi Sultanate (1211–1540s) were drawn from very diverse politico-cultural background and shared very little in terms of what constituted the ideal state, or best political practices. In the absence of a shared history (beyond the perfunctory genuflection to Islam) or a commonly accepted code of political conduct, those who found themselves charged with the task of cobbling together a state with the help of loyal and able administrators and military commanders tended to be extremely suspicious of each other. Thus, the first century or so of the Sultanate witnessed sultans after sultans favouring their slaves, often at the cost of free men, with important and sensitive positions. As Sunil Kumar argued, however, the sultans did so in most cases only after a long period of grooming, testing their skills, fortitude and (above all) loyalty by making them serve for years in lower or middling positions. It was not before they had proved their usefulness and steadfastness under testing circumstances that the sultan chose some of them to favour with lucrative and sensitive posts. The 'natal alienation' of slaves worked in their favour, so to say. But that by itself was no guarantee of their loyalty, which again turned out to be the most valued, and hence assiduously cultivated and promoted, quality in the servant.

It would be lazy on our part to conclude that slavery during the Sultanate period provided ample opportunities for upward mobility. The fact that some slaves could command free men did not necessarily bring higher social status (even for those in positions of power) or made them superior to the free men in the eyes of those who had little to do with state power. In any case, the phenomenon of the few slaves making it big

<sup>138</sup> For interesting takes on elite slavery, see Gavin Hambly, 'Who Were the Chihilgani, the Forty Slaves of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish of Delhi?' *Iran* 10, 1972, 57–62; Peter Jackson, 'The Mamluk Institution in Early Muslim India', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 122, no. 2, 1990, 40–58; Irfan Habib, 'Formation of the Sultanate Ruling Class of the Thirteenth Century', in *Medieval India I: Researches in the History of India 1200–1750*, ed. Irfan Habib (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1–21; and Kumar, 'When Slaves were Nobles'.



only alerts us to the fact of temporary and strategic reversal of the given hierarchy between the slave and the free men. Even this reversal owed much to the extraordinary circumstances of disjuncture and instability in which the rivalries between the entrenched elites made them fall back on the loyalty of the slaves and menials, and converted their lack of social status into a pragmatic administrative and political capital.

Let us not forget that of the thousands that adorned the 'stable' of the sultans' personal slaves, only a few dozens in most cases could make it to the positions of authority. Unfortunately, we know very little about the conditions of (mostly slave) servants who were condemned to toil in the palace (or elsewhere) without much hope of redemption. A comparison of the slave-quarters in the Sultanate palaces with the stables for horses clearly suggests that a superior breed horse from the steppes was far more precious to its master than were the multitudes of hapless slaves.

Yet the idea of a slave epitomising unwavering loyalty towards the master/monarch lived on long after the practice of deploying slaves in large numbers in important positions of power gave way. It was common for those seeking favour from their sultan-benefactors to refer to themselves as (the king's) faithful slaves.<sup>139</sup> For, paradoxically, it was by claiming to give up their freedom and independent agency that the future *iqtadars* (holders of miscellaneous charges including revenue) and *mansabdars* (ranked officials) of the Sultanate and the Mughal periods, respectively, hoped to find their route to prosperity and redemption. This trend is even more starkly visible among those who have come to be associated in the mainstream history with bhakti 'movement',<sup>140</sup> which arose in north India during the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries and is often seen as offering a strong social critique of the existing social order.<sup>141</sup> From Raidas

<sup>139</sup> Kumar, 'When Slaves were Nobles', 52.

<sup>140</sup> Almost identical sentiments were expressed in the fifteenth-century Sanskrit treatise entitled *Purushapariksha*. See Jha, 'Beyond the Local and the Universal'.

<sup>141</sup> For a general account of bhakti with a summary of its modern historiography, see Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987). For a discussion of the critique of caste-ridden social order in some of the bhakti currents, see Irfan Habib, 'Kabir: The Historical Setting', in *Religion in Indian History*, ed. Irfan Habib, 5th edn (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015), 142–57; for a more recent treatment of the phenomenon of devotionism, ones that provide a more complicated picture, see John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India*

and Kalidas to Tulsidas and (even) Keshavdas, it was common to declare one's dasa status vis-à-vis the divine (i.e., God's slave) to claim a higher spiritual status and possibly salvation through divine intercession. This form of notional slavery, however, was wilful on the part of the 'slave' (dasa) and hence the choice of being, becoming or refusing to become a slave remained with the slave himself. This form of subjection can hardly be compared to the more regular forms of servitude that were underwritten by law, binding on the (future) slave and dependent on the arbitrary power of the master. It was also parallelly constituted through the notions of duty, love and affect—a set of ethical codes—in which the prescriptions of how to be a good slave-servant were presented, along with the notional ways of behaviour the masters were supposed to observe (see Sajjad Alam Rizvi's chapter).

It is no less complicated to understand the other continuing forms of subjection like caste and what happened to it under the Sultanate. Much of the modern historiography of Delhi Sultanate from the middle to the end of the twentieth century actually veered between two extremes as far as the relationship of the Sultanate ruling classes with already existing forms of social subjection in India was concerned. On the one extreme was K. S. Lal who thought that the Delhi Sultanate introduced and established slavery in India as a common practice primarily by turning the (mostly Hindu) war prisoners into slaves.<sup>142</sup> On the other side was Mohammad Habib who argued that the lower caste working classes of north India were so oppressed by their upper-caste masters that they welcomed the invaders, who were steeped in the egalitarian ideology of Islam, with open arms, thus paving the way for the erosion of the caste rigidities.<sup>143</sup> As Irfan Habib noted, Lal had very thin, if any at all, basis for his sweeping claims. Nor

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*and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Christian Lee Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion and the Premodern Public Sphere in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>142</sup> Kishori Saran Lal, *Growth of Muslim Population in Medieval India, A.D. 1000–1800* (Delhi: Research Publications in Social Sciences, 1973).

<sup>143</sup> Mohammad Habib, 'Introduction to Elliot and Dowson's History of India as Told by Its Own Historians vol. II', in *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period: Collected Essays of Professor Mohammad Habib*, ed. K. A. Nizami, vol. 1 (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1974), 33–110.

did Habib find sufficient empirical basis for Mohammad Habib's theory of emancipatory Islam.<sup>144</sup> In another piece on the monotheistic movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Irfan Habib asserted that the Muslim governing classes of the Arab Sind or of the Sultanate and the early Mughal period never developed a concerted critique of the caste system. This was so because they were more interested in exploiting the fruits of the occupational and social stability that the caste/varna hierarchy provided than they were in enforcing real or imagined egalitarian impulses of originary Islam.

An interesting 'aside,' not entirely irrelevant, in this respect is the paradoxical development that we witness from the fifteenth century onwards. Delhi Sultanate deployed slaves all through its expansive territories in north India, reflecting the ubiquity of slavery in the Subcontinent since the early centuries of the Common Era. The Mughal state and society seem to have been much more discrete in so far as their use of slaves was concerned. Yet the ideal template of the most trusted servant continued to invoke slaves until the nineteenth century. In the devotional traditions of north India, where every other bhakti poet took delight in representing themselves as slaves of God, the ideal of apparently absolute loyalty of the ghulam/dasa became an easily respected virtue and a highly valued cultural capital. Even in matters related to the secular affairs of the state, whether with respect to ordinary servants or to the highest minister of the state, referring to oneself as a slave had become a matter of righteous pride.

Comparing the ethical injunctions or expectations surrounding the servants during the late medieval and early modern periods (whether in the *akhlaq* texts discussed by Rizvi in this volume or the instances from the *tazkira* texts discussed by Tandon) with those of the first millennium of the Common Era, it appears to us that there is a definite shift towards a more institutionalised form of subjection. *Panchatantra* was careful to point out that relations of loyalty and trust were critical for maintenance

<sup>144</sup> See Irfan Habib, 'Economic History of the Delhi Sultanate: An Essay in Interpretation,' *Indian Historical Review* 4, no. 1, 1977, 287–302. For a scathing critique of Lal's thesis, see Simon Digby, 'Akbar the Great. Vol. III. Society and Culture in 16th Century India by Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava,' *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies* 38, no. 2, 1975, 463.

of order, whether in the household or at the level of state and society in general. However, no text in that period, not even *Manusmṛiti*, seeks to provide a strict code by which the conduct of the service class was to be defined beyond a vague ethical requirement. In the period from fourteenth century onwards, both in the Sanskrit literary corpus as well as in the Persian (the two dominant literary cultures that laid the grids of different levels of social/political power), very systematic codes around the conduct of the servants, rules about hiring them, and even rituals microscopically and metaphorically representing and reinforcing their plight seem to be congealing in a much denser pattern than was available till then. Chapters in this volume by Rizvi and Tandon provide interesting testimonies to this claim vis-à-vis the Persian ecumene. We also know, on the other hand, that this is the period (fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries) when nearly 50 different law books seeking to codify the rules of conduct for shudras, mostly by brahman scholars, were compiled.<sup>145</sup> Considering that the bulk of the domestic servants was drawn from the shudra castes, this is a tremendous wilful move towards regulation of an entire service class. As and when the colonial masters chipped in, they must have found a dense ethical/semi-legal discourse around, which already sought to bind the master-servant relations in asymmetrical systems of power. Yet, in the pre-colonial period, this 'traditional' discourse was varied, dispersed and largely left at the mercy of a variety of non-state institutions at the local levels to be 'enforced'. The British colonial government's anxiety to build upon this existing resource was reflected, among other things, in its ambitious projects to (selectively) translate particular texts of Sanskrit and Persian in order to capture, reshape and rearticulate this 'tradition' and, when deemed exigent, overlay them with its own specific regulatory requirements. Nitin Sinha's chapter in this volume explores some of the issues that emerged in the process of the colonial government's attempt to deal with the 'servant problem' during the second half of the eighteenth century.

<sup>145</sup> This is an astonishingly ignored corpus of literature as far as historians are concerned. See Theodore Benke, 'The *Śūdrācāraśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa: A 16th Century Manual of Dharma for Śūdras' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

## The Colonial Period

In quantitative terms, it is not possible to assert that the spurt to codify the master-servant relationship reached its apogee during the early colonial period. Yet attempts were certainly made to translate (first from Sanskrit to Persian, and then, from Sanskrit and Persian to English), codify and make 'relevant' texts usable for matters of governance. This in itself marked a qualitative change under colonial rule. While in many instances continuities could be traced back, the 'fixity' assigned to the custom through these translations and the primacy accorded to certain sociological categories such as religion and caste to understand Indian society is perceptibly visible in the early colonial phase.

Certain distinctive broad-brush shifts may be outlined right at the beginning before we take up the theme of caste in some detail. First, European households, broadly speaking, offered a distinctive site of work. The real or constructed language of kin-based relationship with servants, or the slave-servant's role in kinship formation tied to the aspects of progeny or property, did not exist in these households, which meant that work relationship acquired a contractual nature, although as noticed below, the boundaries of permissibility based upon caste and purity did not go away.

Second, we notice the emergence of a few new categories of servant, ayah for instance, and recasting of some existing ones, such as the *munshi*. Ayahs at one level *seemed* to be a part of the longer tradition of female attendants in the feminine quarters of the households (see the chapters on Rajput households by Geetanjali Tyagi and Priyanka Khanna). At another, they signified a new demand for female domestics based predominantly on a contractual relationship of wage. Here, a particular investment on the affective ties and emotional bonds (between ayahs and children, and ayahs and mistresses) appears as a new idiom of 'bonding' beyond languages and practices of servility and kinship widely employed for female attendants of an earlier generation.

Third, the period saw a concerted attempt to regulate the relationship within some variant of the Master-Servant laws. This was an attempt to legally enforce a relationship of status. Such claims of masters were expressed in terms of their inviolable right over servants' labour (cases of absconding servants being criminally prosecuted). Although regulations

did not expressly enjoin private beating of the servants (as happened distinctly in plantations 100 years later), the very form of the relationship as drawn upon personal ties based both upon Indic as well as European ideas, practically meant privatised violence was part of sanctioned moral chastisement (happening both in native and European households; see the chapters by Subramanian and Rastén). Intended regulations were not always easily implemented, but regular efforts to do so reveal the attempts of the colonial state to intervene at various levels such as market, family and labour.

And finally, in the colony, it seems that the racialised logic of authority and violence actually revealed a harsher form of these regulations; one chief distinction between India and Britain was the widespread use of 'breach of contract' to criminally punish domestic servants under some 'essence' of the master-servant rules. Again, legal assessments on instances of abuse and violence on servants by masters were refracted through dividends of race and social rank drawn from religion, gender and caste (Lakshmi Subramanian), which questioned the universality of the rule of law in colonial India.<sup>146</sup>

While the chapters in this volume closely explore these legal implications, in the remaining part of this section, we would revisit the issues of terminologies and their relationship with caste and service.

In the most detailed and authoritative survey of eastern India in the early nineteenth century, surveyor Francis-Hamilton Buchanan was often perplexed by the lack of 'uniformity' in how terms relating to servitude (and beyond) were used and applied, not only in different provinces but even in adjoining *pergunahs* (sub-units of a district) and estates. He offered a stern word of advice to the colonial administrators, especially those tasked with framing laws, to ascertain the most accurate local definition of terms. Buchanan clearly expressed a fear that regulation (by laws) based on these terms, which had the potential of being 'universally beneficial', could end up being partial and prejudicial. He, however, admitted to

<sup>146</sup> Jordanna Bailkin, 'The Boot and the Spleen: When Was Murder Possible in British India?' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 2, 2006, 462-93; Michael Carrington, 'Officers, Gentlemen, and Murderers: Lord Curzon's Campaign against "Collisions" between Indians and Europeans, 1899-1905', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 3, 2013, 780-819.

have largely failed to guard against these variations in arriving at his own understanding of these terms and was often 'completely deceived by the use of the same words in opposite, or at least very different meanings'.<sup>147</sup> For instance, certain older terms related to domestic servitude such as *ghulam/gulmi* and *launda/laundi* were in the early nineteenth century simultaneously used for household servants, whom Buchanan classified as 'slaves' and 'free', respectively, using wage remuneration as the criteria. He particularly noted a scarcity of female servants in these regions and the ones he frequently included under this category were *chakrani* and *dasi*. Again, these servants were not necessarily remunerated with wages but were older women 'who had lost all their kindred and attended as domestics for food and raiment'.<sup>148</sup> He suspected young girls to be concubines 'veiled under a decent name'.<sup>149</sup> A particular category of female domestics who were remunerated by wages were *panibharin* who lived in their own homes and were paid for bringing water to the richer households. Buchanan noted that the broader category of male domestics included *bhandaris* (stewards), who took care of all the household effects (a term still common in north India for those who on big occasions of feasting take care of the kitchen as a supervisor); *khidmutgars*, who dressed their masters, attended them at meals, supplied them with tobacco and betel, and made their beds; and *tahaliyas*, who cleaned the kitchen and utensils, and brought food, water and other provisions.<sup>150</sup> The differences between native and European households are thus evident even at the level of terms and categories of servants employed. Apart from broad overlaps, we do not find mention of *panibharin*, *bhandari* and *tahaliya* in numerous lists prepared either officially or as part of travelogues and other prescriptive materials on European households.

The distinction between servants who were paid (in wages) and those who were not was also noted by Grierson, who conducted a survey in the same region as Buchanan in the late nineteenth century. In his

<sup>147</sup> Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809–10* (Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1928), 161–62.

<sup>148</sup> Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810–11* (Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1939), 192.

<sup>149</sup> Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea*, 159.

<sup>150</sup> Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur*, 192.



FIGURE 12: Silver Stick Bearer in a European Household

Courtesy: © British Library Board. Charles D'Oyly, Album, shelfmark P 2481, f. 40.

distinction, *chakar* was a paid servant as opposed to *bahiya* and *harwah* (unpaid servant). He suggested other prevalent distinctions also, which were based upon ‘implied’ period of engagement: *naukar* and *harwah* were engaged by the year in contrast to *chakar*, who was mostly paid monthly. The overlap between farm and household servants is evident in Grierson’s inquiries since such conflation was more evident in rural households (with organic connection between housework and fieldwork) where he was primarily conducting his investigations. A recasting of a particular term of servitude previously attached to a more dependent slave-like condition was *khawas*—now signifying the archetypical male household servant of the region (of both Muslims and Hindus of rank).<sup>151</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Grierson, *Bihar Peasant Life*.



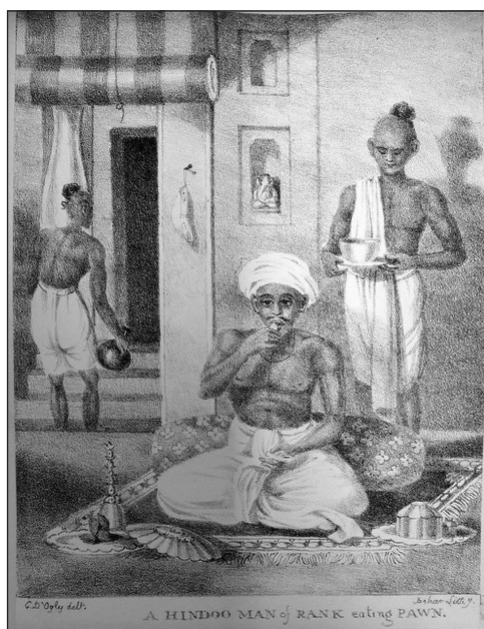


FIGURE 13: A Hindoo man of rank eating pawm (betel leaf)

Courtesy: © British Library Board. Charles D'Oyly, Album, shelfmark P 2481.

The Anglo-Indian presence in India led to further amplification of the terms of service and transformation of meaning of certain other service categories. The superior servants, the *naukars*, such as *munshis*, *banians*, *shroffs* and *sircars*, were at times designated as the 'head of the servants' because of their increasing role in the colonial political as well as knowledge economy, which also put them in the role of managers of the European households (see Nitin Sinha's chapter). Seemingly, by the late nineteenth century, while these groups moved into subordinate clerical jobs, the terms *naukar* and *chakar* themselves became synonymous and rhymingly lyrical to the Anglo-Indian ears. Temporal shifts notwithstanding, the problem also confounds when one encounters the same term used in different places with different meanings. For instance, a *jemadar* was a second ranked native officer in the company of sepoys as well as a domestic servant in

charge of bearers, peons, orderlies and other low-order servants. The term *naukar* itself had undergone a change before the colonial rule—from literate service providers to military sepoys.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, a majority of the *ayahs* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were Portuguese (born in India, hence clubbed together with ‘black servants’), but by the mid-nineteenth century and afterwards, the profession of the *ayah* was predominated by *mehtaranees* (lower caste female sweeper/cleaner).

By the late eighteenth century, caste also came to operate at different overlapping levels: from pan-regional to regional, and to more graded local expressions of *jati* to becoming a mobile occupational corporate body as was the case with *kahars*, palanquin bearers, who came to Calcutta from Orissa and Bihar in large numbers. These localised hierarchies of castes were both rigid and fluid to different degrees and came to be shaped by particular political and social conflicts and histories.<sup>153</sup> Servile labour and menial work, as we have noted, were largely performed by marginalised social groups in different space–time settings, which were increasingly becoming a mark of a lower caste status. Caste-mediated notions of purity and pollution, which also became an expression of status hierarchy, informed the organisation, allocation and valuation of menial work. This was one of the most visible features of caste practices by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>154</sup>

The Europeans in India, from very early on, reported a degree of ‘caste consciousness’ among their household servants. This, they argued, necessitated an unusually large retinue of servants as individuals would insist on performing only ‘specialised’ domestic work permissible within their caste status. We recommend reading this recurrent claim with more than a pinch of salt, that is, in a way that extracts the historical dynamism

<sup>152</sup> Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>153</sup> Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Padma Velaskar, ‘Theorising the Interaction of Caste, Class and Gender: A Feminist Sociological Approach’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 50, no. 3, 2016, 389–414.

<sup>154</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

from the rather frozen European representation of caste and culture as 'timeless' civilisational entities of alleged 'Asiatic despotism'. For instance, Europeans claimed that Muslim servants hesitated in touching jootha plates with pork eaten from them but we do know that a majority of khansamans and khidmutgars in European households were indeed Muslims. An occupational hierarchy was liable to be read as 'caste'-based hierarchy. In some large household establishments, *chobdars* (silver mace bearers) denied working as *soontahbardars* (pole bearers) because it was below their occupational dignity. In such instances, rather than always working as a medium of oppression, caste could have provided an easy resource of resistance to deny doing 'extra' work or work which, servants thought, questioned their internal hierarchy. Buchanan, in his survey of Dinajpur district, encountered a class of male domestics employed on a monthly basis who did 'everything that they are desired' by their native masters.<sup>155</sup> This led him to conclude that the 'rules' which servants of Europeans had established were actually a mere 'invention of their own'.<sup>156</sup>

In some cases of potential defilement, caste seems to have its hold: brahmans who were employed as cooks in Hindu households refrained from working in European homes because of food practices. Recent ethnography on urban India has also reported that jobs considered more polluting (cleaning bathrooms and scavenging, for instance) were routinely avoided by family members and even household servants; instead, low-caste (or outcaste) 'untouchable' sweepers were employed on a part-time basis for such activities—a practice which had continued from the colonial period.<sup>157</sup>

The avoidance of work (and also of servants who performed them) was not absolute and acquired a more nuanced pattern of social behaviour and prescribed rules of conduct. The colonial ethnographer William Crooke reported that *kewat* (boatmen caste) women in late nineteenth-century United Provinces were excommunicated from their caste if found

<sup>155</sup> Francis Buchanan, *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District of Dinajpur in the Province of Bengal* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1833), 78.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Frøystad, 'Master-Servant Relations'; Dickey, 'Permeable Homes'; Rachel Tolen, 'Between Bungalow and Outhouse: Class Practice and Domestic Service in a Madras Railway Colony' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996).

working as a menial maid-servant in upper-caste families. Menial service here included plastering kitchen house, cleaning used utensils, washing clothes, shampooing and fanning. Interestingly, no such restrictions were placed on the men of the caste who took up menial service.<sup>158</sup> An ethnography conducted in 1950s' rural Bengal reported that low-caste servants (*harhi* and *bagdi*) employed in brahman households were 'permitted' to wash clothes and hang them but were not allowed to touch them when they dried.<sup>159</sup> The 'chicken and egg' question of whether caste status determined allocation of menial work or menial work produced stigmatised status cannot be quickly settled and often requires careful and situated investigations for different historical settings. This process of the close association of caste with work was also part of the emergence of pan-regional caste identities, at least from the nineteenth century, conjoining jatis into larger clusters of 'enumerated communities' by placing them in a hierarchical order (in the idealised varna order) through the enumerative technologies of the modern state (like census). The resurgence of such solidified but equally mobile (in terms of seeking higher ritual status) caste claims also coevally developed during the 'mass phase' of national movement of the early twentieth century.

While slave-servant continuum and caste-menial association seem to remain important, the general impression that domestic service was necessarily stigmatising needs to be qualified, even though it was only true for a certain category of servants. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were several instances of lower castes (*chamars* from United Provinces, *mahars* from Bombay, *paraiyar* from Madras, *balmikis* from Punjab) who traditionally acted as servile labourers of higher castes in rural settings but were incorporated in the urban labour market as wage workers, municipal employees and domestic servants in the British households and newly emerging public institutions. Such incorporations point to a relative degree of social and economic mobility.<sup>160</sup> Domestic

<sup>158</sup> William Crooke, *North Indian Notes and Queries: A Monthly Periodical* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1894), 42.

<sup>159</sup> Shrimati Jyotirmoyee Sarma, 'A Bengal Village', *Economic & Political Weekly* 5, no. 32-33-34, 1953, 901-910.

<sup>160</sup> Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 145; Aparna Balachandran, 'Catholics

service in European homes allowed these castes a degree of possibility to overcome their formerly dependent, servile and untouchable condition. Mehtaranees working as ayahs could usually, though not always, secure better employment conditions, at least for their children. A powerful autobiography from the middle of the twentieth century by an 'untouchable' (Hazari) talks about domestic service in European homes (in contrast to Indian) as a site of both subjection but also of forging new social ties and generating possibilities of upward mobility.<sup>161</sup>

Let us go back to the case of Kahars, the caste of palanquin bearers, who were one of the two most numerous groups of 'menial servants' in eighteenth-century colonial Calcutta. The early nineteenth-century ethnography in eastern India (Buchanan–Hamilton) and reports on slavery in India (published in the 1840s) mentioned of their depressed status and assigned them a slave-like status.<sup>162</sup> However, all this while they diversified their occupational presence: from palanquin bearers to domestic servants, to working in European indigo factories in the mid-nineteenth century to becoming peons and *durwans* in public institutions in the late nineteenth century. By this time, they were seen as archetypal personal servants and were considered to have moved up the social ladder. They acted as servants of all 'good castes' (read higher castes).<sup>163</sup> Their changed status was most clearly recorded in a note prepared in the 1930s to explain the origin and nature of the depressed castes and their relation to the Hindu social system. Under the broader grouping of the kahar caste, those sub-sects primarily engaged in domestic service positioned themselves as

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in Protest: Lower-Caste Christianity in Early Colonial Madras', *Studies in History* 16, no. 2, 2000, 248; Jim Masselos, 'Jobs and Jobbery: The Sweeper in Bombay Under the Raj', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 19, no. 2, 1982, 105; Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>161</sup> Hazari, *An Indian Outcaste: The Autobiography of an Untouchable* (London: Bannisdale Press, 1951).

<sup>162</sup> Indian Law Commission, *Reports of the Indian Law Commission Upon Slavery in India, January 15, 1841: With Appendices*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 26 April 1841.

<sup>163</sup> Henry Beverley, *Report of the Census of Bengal 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), 176; Matthew Atmore Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes, As Represented in Benares* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Company, 1872), 339.

superior to those doing other menial jobs. They observed particular food taboos, which in fact made them 'desirable' as domestic servants. What we notice in this example is the attainment of ritual purity, for some castes, through domestic service. Both kahars and gors of north India, associated with household service and carrying palanquins, were formerly treated as untouchables but subsequently their status changed to 'clean shudra'. Because they worked in the households of high class patrons, arguably, the scope to reinvent the new caste status was relatively easier for them.<sup>164</sup> This is an area of research that certainly deserves further exploration. The quest is not to take an *a priori* stand on the relationship between lower caste and low-grade domestic work but to interrogate each of the two vectors—caste and domestic service—as historically evolving in a conjoined way.

Caste norms and practices, as it appears from several instances, functioned as a kind of 'social regulation' and have shaped the nature of master–servant relationship to different degrees. This notion of regulation through social, ethical and religious norms in the precolonial past has been explored in several chapters in this volume. The texts and commentaries on ethical and social conduct (dharmashastric, *akhlaqi* and *fatawa*-legalistic) dwelt on the question of the master–servant relationship as part of the more appropriate pursuit of life. We have to read these texts with a degree of caution as they are not necessarily codes and laws in the modern sense. But even the institutions and claims of rule of law (by the colonial state) were not entirely or always transformative and often took a view of regulating (master–servant relationship) through putative social and cultural idioms. For instance, the Law Commission entrusted with framing civil code for India in the late nineteenth century suggested that it was fairly impossible to lay down precise, hard and fast rules when

<sup>164</sup> Based on ethnographic materials collected since the 1940s, the article by Opler and Shukla gives a great deal of insight into possibilities of caste mobility through service. For instance, kahar men could tease and joke with women of the high-caste households for whom they worked, which otherwise would be resented if done by other low-caste service providers. Morris E. Opler and Shaligram Shukla, 'Palanquin Symbolism: The Special Vocabulary of the Palanquin-Bearing Castes of North Central India', *The Journal of American Folklore* 81, no. 321, 1968, 220. We are thankful to Ufaque Paikar for bringing this source to our notice. Also see, Rajat Kanta Ray, 'The Kahar Chronicle', *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 4, 1987, 711–49.

confronted with the question of ‘regulating’ personal relations (including master–servant). It recommended instead ‘private morality, public opinion and the affection’ as more appropriate for regulating these relations.<sup>165</sup> This attempt to stop short of transforming an asymmetrical relationship of status into enforceable legal contract did not mean that master–servant relationship remained untouched by the weight of colonial law, nor did it signify neutrality of the state. The failure of certain aspects of ‘modern regulation’ did not mean that the relationship was by default ‘unchangingly traditional’. The power of the law, and the nexus of the state and masters could, in the absence of direct state regulation, be worked in the masters’ favour. The latter would keep the servants on a tight leash through other means such as wage control and wage theft, moral chastisement, and public flogging sanctioned and directed by courts. The chapters on the late eighteenth century clearly show how laws for regulating labour market (Nitin Sinha) and crime (Simon Rastén and Lakshmi Subramanian) often intersected in the figure of the servant. The widespread spirit and application of master and servant regulations clearly meant that master–servant relationship was not beyond the law but appeared in it through different routes.

## WRAPPING UP

The attempt to open up a new field of inquiry is as much seeded with possibilities as with challenges and limitations. Why have domestic servants not been adequately studied so far is an animating question, which we have tried to explain in previous sections. But this is also a question framed around absence. How to study it is yet another, which is about methodology. We also, however, need to ask, why should we study domestic servants? The presence of the past in the contemporary, and the way the care economy is expanding globally in spite of the increasing automation of many forms of public services, the future of both global south and global north seems wedded to the fact that ‘personal service’ in one form or the other is not going to disappear. While the movement

<sup>165</sup> India Legislative Department, *The Master and Servant Bill, 1879* (Simla: Government C.B. Press, 1879).

of ideas and people (the unequal pattern of migration from global south to global north in the domestic service sector, for instance) reveals *spatial* connections, the territory of the past is historicised primarily through records that are left at historians' disposition. Even for reading silences, we need words, written and/or spoken.

As two of the editors who work on modern period wrote this text together, with one having expertise in the pre-modern period, the ghost of the earlier framework—'continuity and change'—was bound to appear and perhaps for some good reasons, if one needs to make sense of the long-durée nature of the past. For the two of us, Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, it was the persistent anxiety and doubt to consider colonialism's advent into South Asia as the beginning point of writing about such an aspect of the past whose antecedents, be it along institutions such as caste and law, or practices such as loyalty, affect and violence (in their everyday forms), go a long way back in time. Of course, neither time nor space can be flattened. So, our attempt is not to present a synthesised view on *the* history of the servants' pasts but to suggest some forms of breaks and continuities which were both diachronic and synchronous. When the views of *akhlaqi* benevolence between master and servant prevailed in Mughal north India, at the same time, the caste and ethnic distinctions were also practised to shape the master-servant relationship.

Our collaboration across temporal divides has done one more thing. It has made us realise that historical periods might appear different depending on what vantage point of the period we chose to look from. Seeing the pre-modern from the modern makes the former appear more fluid, more diverse, more regionally disparate and yet robust (that is, not essentially 'fragmentary')—households were expansive, kinships were extended, social identities were localised and legal injunctions were normative. Modern (colonial) state then seems to be straightjacketing a lot of these features: imposing monopoly over the use of legitimate violence, setting up a universalising process of justice, categorising and enumerating social identities leading to fixed hierarchy, and so on. However, when the modern is viewed from the previous decades and centuries, some of these features indeed appear to be at work, but also the intermixed formations of the social and political are discernible. The colonial state appears strong in its list of intentions (for instance, to enumerate all sorts of labouring



groups through registration, which hardly happened) but institutionally weak or compromised to instigate those changes. However, through its own prism of sociology and its necessity to cobble up workable knowledge to administer, it bundled up the lived social practices, the diverse juridical possibilities, the fluid systems of stratification into a category, which we historians with varying levels of *discomfort* deal with: culture.<sup>166</sup> Moving from early modern to modern allows us to remark that traditions do not always appear as ‘invented’ (as a sinister design of modernity) but processual, crafted, (mis)used and contestatory. Cracks in the ways of imposition of modern laws, views, ideas and practices are seen to be utilised to make the business of everyday life moving.

In terms of master–servant relationship, if one strand encourages us to recognise the centrality of the laws coming through colonial apparatus, the other leaves us pondering over the role of the norms and ethics of servitude as they evolved from the past(s). The moneyed class of Indian merchants and zamindars clothed their servants and attendants in the red coat to imitate the power of the Company sepoys; the Company officials set up *janana deorhi* by marrying or keeping Indian bibis on the fashion of Mughal aristocracy. The interpenetration of forms of sociability and power constantly merge and retreat, creating zones of familiarity and strangeness. In this social and political context, domestic servants occupied this porous narrow ground perilously: they were intimately distant, suspiciously trustful and laboriously invisible. The return of the *dasi* and slave in the language of nineteenth-century social and labour reformists shows the power of tradition, or ways of thinking through tradition, to explain the conditions that were modern. The servants dragging the members of the Tagore family to the court to claim their pensions shows the subaltern

<sup>166</sup> On colonialism’s role in knowledge production, there are innumerable books to be referenced here. Peter J. Marshall, ed., *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); and Kate Teltscher, *India Inscripted: European and British Writing on India, 1600–1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) are worth mentioning, of course, apart from the exciting phase of the 1990s with the publication of Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

familiarity with the law. The graded pasts are not about searching for absolute ruptures or tracing harmonious continuities; they are about discovering the loci of the blending of power with language, customs with laws, and resistance with authority.

We started with everyday and anecdotal. We would like to finish with long histories and graded pasts. There is one nugget of historical discovery which we leave at the doorsteps of the future research. In contemporary times, the word *mehtar* means sweeper and waste-cleaner. This was also its meaning in the nineteenth century. But in the early modern period, it meant 'greater, elder, prince, lord, governor, valet and head servant'.<sup>167</sup> *Servants' pasts* is also an attempt to discover, among other things, the power of the terms and the changes in the meaning of the relationships that a simple mapping of the terminologies might not reveal.

<sup>167</sup> F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1892), 1352.



# Lineages of Servitude

## Stray Thoughts about Servants in the 'Ancient' Past

UMA CHAKRAVARTI\*

### WHAT DO/CAN WE KNOW ABOUT SERVITUDE IN EARLY HISTORY?

Domestic servitude—labour provided by domestic servants—is as old as the sexual division of labour in which women carry out unpaid work in a household. Once the sexual division of labour is established, and certain tasks are allotted to women, anyone who wishes to escape from household labour and can pay for a substitute seeks to do so through domestic servitude. This is aptly portrayed in the story of an old brahman man who had a young wife whom he doted on. The young wife insisted that she needed a domestic maid to do her household chores and the old man readily provided such a person by reducing a family to bondage so that the wife's chores could be performed by a bondswoman.<sup>1</sup> There are many other examples in Pali Buddhist literature from which we can build a picture of domestic servitude wherein the *dasis* lived in the households of their masters and mistresses. They cleaned, swept, cooked, fetched water from rivers, pounded and ground foodstuffs, cared for children, wet-nursed infants, preserved food, threshed, looked after cattle—in

\* This essay is an extension of a short note I wrote for a small monograph on domestic servants. I am grateful to Patricia Uberoi for first persuading me to write the note and then facilitating my recovery of the note so that I could expand it for this volume on servants' pasts.

<sup>1</sup> Vessantara Jataka, in *The Jataka*, ed. E. B. Cowell, vol. 6 (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2005), 246–306.

short, they did everything that women were expected to do (feed, care, look after) to reproduce the physical body and the household through drudge labour. In this Interjection, I provide a few vignettes of the lives of those who performed servile labour for households that held resources and used labour both for production and the social reproduction of the household. These people are known in the Pali literature—which is the main textual source for this Interjection—collectively as *dasa*, *kammaka*, *porisa*, which translate respectively into slave, worker and man (implying literally a man with no other identity). I also use other textual resources, such as the Arthasastra and the Mahabharata, where there are significant references to those who perform servile labour to amplify my analysis. The generic term *dasa* and its female equivalent *dasi* stand for subservience without distinguishing between slavery, debt bondage or the types of labour that the *dasa/dasi* performed. The Rg. Veda describes a *dasa* as a two-footed animal in much the same way as Roman texts refer to slaves as mute instruments with no agency or autonomy who laboured for their masters.<sup>2</sup> Pali literature provides many instances of where the term *dasa* implies the absolute power of the master over the individual—the power to kill him even.<sup>3</sup>

A significant feature of domestic servitude—in which one must include work on the land of the household—is the ambiguous status of servants. Invariably, through a paternalistic rendering of the relationships between masters and servants, the servants are represented as ‘family members’, tied to the household through affective relations and even sharing certain unique spiritual and supernatural qualities of family members. However, the realities of such social hierarchies and differences of power are movingly highlighted in early sources. For example, a maid called Punna, literally meaning ‘little’ (perhaps because she had been brought in when young or was metaphorically regarded as little and under the authority of others), knew the difference between herself and her mistresses. The young

<sup>2</sup> R. T. H. Griffith, ed., *Rg. Veda* III.62.14 (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1971); D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956), 98.

<sup>3</sup> V. Fausboll, ed., *Jataka*, vol. 6 (London: Pali Text Society, 1964), 300; D. R. Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India: As Depicted in Pali and Sanskrit Texts* (New Delhi: New Age Printing Press, 1960), 64.

dasi, probably the most powerless in the social hierarchy and who knew of no other existence, could not conceive of escape. Her story makes it clear that the realm of the possible for her employers is vastly different from her own. Offered a boon, her master asks for tax-free land, the mistress asks for cattle, the son for a fine horse and the daughter-in-law for ornaments. But 'poor little Punna', as she is called, just asks for a new pestle and mortar so that she can grind more efficiently and with less labour than with her old and blunted grinding stone.<sup>4</sup> Janabai, a thirteenth-century bhakti poetess, performed hard labour for her devout master (who clearly extracted his pound of work from her despite his devoutness), seeking the help of god to complete her tasks.<sup>5</sup> And though the children of dasis can grow up within the household where their mothers labour, however important and wise they might be and however well they are incorporated into the family, they are not the equals of the children of the masters and must always retain their specific status, which is distinct, inferior and marked by subservience.<sup>6</sup> There is an unusual account of a daughter of a Sakya king by a dasi who grew up as the king's daughter like other members of his household. A king from a neighbouring state asked for the Sakya king's daughter's hand but the latter did not want to give this suitor his real, blue-blooded daughter in marriage and so he passed off his daughter by a dasi as his high-born daughter. Many years later the truth of the matter

<sup>4</sup> Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, ed., *The Mahavagga*, Nalanda Devnagari Pali Series (Nalanda: Bihar Government, 1956), 255.

<sup>5</sup> From a free-flowing discussion with the late Sharmila Rege, c. 2005.

<sup>6</sup> In other words, the construction of the family as inclusive of the servants is part of the ideology of paternalism, recasting exploitation in terms of mutual obligations and strong bonds of affection in the same way that US plantation slavery was recast as paternalism in the writings of white masters. As I often ask my students while teaching them of slavery as a social formation: do they ever think about Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*, about how she is a central part of Scarlett's life and of the way the narrative unfolds, and yet we know nothing of her family? Did she have one? It is enough to tell us that she was the anchor in Scarlett's life, no more than that. The tragedy of paternalism in the context of slavery is that the masters and mistresses believed that their slaves would want to live with them and could not understand why they had deserted the plantations and their masters when the Civil War began. Far from understanding the desire for autonomy on the part of the slaves, the masters and mistresses felt betrayed by the desertions.

came out and the king of the neighbouring state not only abandoned his wife but also waged a war upon the Sakyan king for the deceitful act that had sullied the former's lineage.<sup>7</sup>

That women in servitude had little autonomy and were subject to the whims of their masters and mistresses is also evident from references in early texts. The essential difference between a *dasa* and a *dasi* rested on the sexual vulnerability of the *dasi*. There are many instances in Buddhist narrative literature where the masters slept with their *dasīs*, who had no choice in the matter. But their mistresses then beat the *dasīs* since they could say nothing to their husbands. In one case, a *dasi* was left contemplating suicide as the only way out of her doubly tortured existence.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising that Buddhist texts use the expression, meek as a 100-piece *dasi*, that is, a *dasi* bought in the labour market, who is contrasted with the spirited daughter-in-law who has agency, unlike the *dasi*.<sup>9</sup>

India's famous epic, the *Mahabharata*, also indicates that when a person, including an ex-queen, is reduced to servitude, she loses her autonomy and can be sexually violated.<sup>10</sup> In an infamous gambling episode, a king first stakes all of his possessions—land, gold, the kingdom itself, including the *dasas* and *dasīs* (but excluding the brahmans)—then his children, his younger brothers and then himself. Finally, he stakes the queen who is sought and dragged to the assembly where her joint husbands, including the ex-king, have already been reduced to servitude. The victorious side then commands that the ex-queen, now *dasi*, should forthwith begin to sweep their household and finally, in the presence of the entire assembly, the victorious new master makes a sexual gesture inviting the ex-queen to sit on his left thigh, which represents the phallus in the cultural codes of the time. This gesture is meant to establish that the ex-queen is now

<sup>7</sup> E. B. Cowell, ed., *The Jataka*, translated by H. T. Francis, vol. 4 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), 96.

<sup>8</sup> G. P. Malalasekhara, *A Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, vol. 2 (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), 706.

<sup>9</sup> V. Fausboll, ed., *Jataka*, vol. 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1964), 299.

<sup>10</sup> Summarised from my essay, 'Who Speaks for Whom? The Queen, the *Dasi* and Sexual Politics in the *Sabhaparvan*', in *Mahabharata Now: Narratives, Aesthetics, Ethics*, eds Arindam Chakravarti and Sibaji Bandhopadhyaya (Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 132–52.

the sexual property of the person who won her at the stake. There is also an explicit statement that one leches with the dasi: that is considered absolutely acceptable and normal.

The text quotes one of the new masters:

You have been won at the game and made a slave  
And one leches with slaves as the fancy befalls.<sup>11</sup>

And another nobleman from the victorious side reminds the ex-queen:

License with masters is never censured  
That is the slave's rule, remember.<sup>12</sup>

The ex-queen refutes the position that she is now a dasi and refuses to comply with the orders of her new masters. This episode is rarely read from the standpoint of the dasi, the female slave, and is always read as a humiliating moment for the ex-queen who uses every bit of wit that she can muster to refuse to descend to the position of dasi. Her husbands do not counter the legality of their servile status and even strip off their upper cloths—which are a sign of a free nobleman—when their new status is to be made evident to the entire assembly. Then the victors try to strip the ex-queen-now-dasi in full view of the assembly to establish her status as dasi and her humiliation ends only when there are supernatural signs that frighten the titular leader of the victorious side into ending the humiliation. Read along with other accounts of a noblewoman who, along with her family, is reduced to servitude and who almost naturally gravitates towards a king's household to be fed in exchange for labour, the women are routinely subjected to sexual assaults and have to take recourse to retaliatory violence from their kinsmen to end the assaults so that they may remain chaste and virtuous, as is required of upper-caste women. In one example, an ex-queen reduced to servitude negotiates that she will not perform certain jobs that she would otherwise be required to perform: these include unclean work such as bathing, shampooing and other bodily maintenance work.<sup>13</sup> Others who may belong to the permanently servile

<sup>11</sup> Chakravarti, 'Who Speaks for Whom?', 139.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 148; *The Mahabharata*, translated by J. A. B. van Buitenein, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 332.



groups do not appear to be able to negotiate such terms for themselves as the earlier free men and women who continue to wield some autonomy in negotiating terms of work.

## THE WORLD OF THE INARTICULATE: EXPLOITATION AND SUBVERSION

The pitiful quality of life of the poor labouring classes in early India is one feature that the Jataka stories capture. Abject poverty defines the lives of the lower orders, including domestic servants. They are marked out from those who have money by their food, clothing and dwellings. 'In my whole life,' says one of them, 'I have possessed nothing of value.'<sup>14</sup> Often beaten, reviled and abused by their masters, drudgery distinguishes their labour. The food of the dasas and dasis is described as sour gruel, whereas the rich eat rice, ghee and meat sauces.<sup>15</sup> The greatest distance between man and man lies in the fundamental difference between king and dasa. As one unnamed dasa says to himself:

Here is Ajatasattu, the King of Magadha  
He is a man and so am I  
But the King lives in the full enjoyment  
Of the five pleasures of his senses  
A very God methinks  
And here am I,  
A slave, working for him,  
Rising before him, and retiring later to rest,  
Keen to carry out his pleasure,  
Anxious to make myself agreeable in deed and work  
Watching his very looks.<sup>16</sup>

Freedom lies in the power to be, to enjoy resources, to be without restrictions. Servility implies dependence, lack of agency and a complete denial of subjectivity in this reflective characterisation of the master-slave relationship as depicted in this set of ruminations.

<sup>14</sup> Cowell, *Jataka*, 1: 225.

<sup>15</sup> Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, ed., *Anguttara Nikaya*, vol. 1 (Nalanda: Bihar Government, 1959).

<sup>16</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha*, translated by T. W. Rhys Davids, vol. 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1973), 76.

Since historical texts are not written by *dasas* and *dasis*, and because learning, reading and writing are skills that are strongly controlled in hierarchical societies, the texts reflect the values of those who are socially dominant, though they may also represent the point of view of the oppressed or servile groups. Social harmony between social groups otherwise opposed to each other is depicted in Buddhist texts, but one can also discern a tendency to depict an idealised set of relationships that seem to emanate from men of property—the major employers of servile labour—which shows a distrust of those who labour for them. Thus, one well-to-do controller of land says that *dasas* do one thing, say something else and have quite something else in their minds.<sup>17</sup> It is this disjunction between imposed identity and the experiences, fears and desires of the lower classes that the *Jataka* stories manage to represent by the simultaneous incorporation of many different levels of popular consciousness into the text.

A question arises: did early texts recognise the potential of *dasas* and *dasis* to be subversive if not openly defiant and rebellious? A number of strategies appear to be used. For example, the possibility of staving off the authority of the powerful with deviousness rather than defiance is also played out in some of the narratives. The lower orders use Brechtian cunning to try and get rid of their oppressors. One account tells how the harassed servants of a cruel mistress, who beats her servants for the slightest reason, take the first opportunity to get rid of her. While the mistress is bathing in the Ganga, a storm breaks out and everyone scampers away. Finding themselves alone, the attendants say to each other, 'Now is the time to see the last of this creature.' They throw her into the river and hurry off.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the cruel son of a king orders his servants to bathe him in the middle of the river and bring him back again. The servants take him in, but midstream they talk among themselves asking, 'What will the king do to us? Let us kill this wicked wretch here and now. So in you go, you pest!' and they fling him into the water.<sup>19</sup> It is significant, however, that these accounts do not refer to defiance of all forms of authority and

<sup>17</sup> *Majjhima Nikaya (The Middle Length Sayings)*, translated by I. B. Horner, vol. 2 (London: Pali Text Society, 1976), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Cowell, *Jataka*, 1: 156.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

oppression, but only of a ‘cruel’ mistress or a ‘wicked’ prince. I have already referred to stories of loyalty, so taken together these accounts seem to define the limits of authority rather than interrogate authority itself. They depict forms of authority that are acceptable and others that are not. At the same time, the narratives also set the limits and legitimate bases of defiance and subversion.

While the texts sometimes indicate that servile classes should not envy what their masters have, desire—which may only be latent, as in the story of Nanda, the household servant of *gahapati* (land-based men, well-respected in society)—is acknowledged in the narratives. Nanda knows the whereabouts of his young master’s assets left to him by his dead father. When the young master tries to get Nanda to reveal the treasure and the master and servant reach the spot where the treasure is buried, there is a dramatic development. As Nanda stands on the treasure, there is a reversal of the master–servant roles and Nanda addresses the master with authority: ‘You servant of a dasi’s son, how should you have any money here?’ This happens repeatedly each time the dasa stands on the spot where the treasure is hidden, and each time he reverts to his normal servile mien when they return home. Finally the young master is advised to assert his power. He recognises that the spot on which the reversal takes place is the spot where the treasure is buried, so the young master must pull down the dasa from his perch, dig down, remove the family treasure and then make the dasa carry it back home for him.<sup>20</sup> There is no actual transgression of the social space in this narrative, only a temporary reversal; at best a latent desire, a psychological transformation and, perhaps, a recognition on the part of the dasa as well as the propertied, that the key to power and control over others lies in control over wealth. This is evident from the servant’s appropriation of the mode of address of the higher classes, when he has symbolic physical control over the treasure.

What is significant in this narrative is that when the story begins, the ageing *gahapati* considers the dasa a more reliable trustee of his property than his wife. The subversive potential of the wife is recognised, but not that of the dasa. It appears that the lower classes are not perceived as a threat; the threat comes from one who is right inside the home. The dasa’s

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 98–99.

gesture of holding on to the treasure is unexpected and is described as akin to one who is possessed. It comes as a total surprise to all, even perhaps to the dasa himself.

## AUTHORITY AND DOMINANCE: TRANSGRESSION AND ITS LIMITS

From the Jataka accounts, the poor who work for the rich in some servile capacity in the household also see and desire entry into the world of the well-to-do. Almost invariably, entry into this 'other' world is gained through a beautiful nymph-like woman of the upper class. In one account, the son of a dasi is brought up alongside the son of the master. He learns to write, grows up to be 'fairspoken' and 'handsome', and is employed as a private secretary in the master's household. The young man, however, fears that his comfortable situation can only be temporary and that, at any time, he could revert to the status of the other servants, be beaten, imprisoned, branded and fed on slaves' fare. He believes that the way to secure his future is to pass himself off as the son of his master to a merchant friend of the latter who lives far away, to marry his daughter and live happily ever afterwards. The young man carries off the deceit and settles down with the merchant's daughter in great style. The young man is soon found out by his ex-master but, falling at his feet, he manages to convince the master to keep his secret. The master forgives him but makes sure that the young man 'behaves' himself with his wife who is finding it difficult to satisfy the young man's exacting food requirements, which are part of his new existence as a rich man with a beautiful wife.

A key problem for the young man in the narrative is the need to conduct himself publicly in a slave-like manner towards his ex-master. This is required of him in the presence of someone who knows his 'true' station. Others who do not know his secret, including his father-in-law, have thus to be given an explanation for the young man's humble behaviour in the presence of his ex-master (supposedly his father), which enables the young man to keep the lie going. Another version of the same story ends with the dream falling apart. The truth is revealed by a parrot who is sent out in search of the imposter. The parrot succeeds in locating him because the runaway slave's lack of breeding becomes apparent. Unlike those who are

born into wealthy and genteel households, slaves are not used to drinking milk containing a strong drug customary among the gentlefolk to keep out the cold. At a boat party, the young man spits out milk on the merchant's daughter's head. This ends his days as a runaway. He is hauled back to his old master where, according to the narrative, 'once more he has to put up with slaves' food'.<sup>21</sup> The three major elements in this second version are deceit, discovery and a return to the original status. Also, it is significant that the two versions deal with relations between the classes differently. While in the first the problem of social distance is circumvented by an elaborate ruse, in the second servility is so deeply internalised that it is impossible to carry off the deceit. Ultimately breeding shows: no amount of education or training can effectively erase it!

An interesting account of an intellectual confrontation between a high-caste brahman and a poor dasi girl is found in a different genre of Buddhist texts, the *Therigatha*. This text contains a collection of verses composed by women who joined the Buddhist monastic organisation. Verses attributed to Punna—a dasi in her previous existence who had hauled water for the family of her master—query a brahman bathing in icy cold water in the river about why he subjects himself to such misery when he has the option not to do so (this is an option she does not have). Punna says:

Drawer of water, I [go] down to the stream  
 Even in winter in fear of blows,  
 Harassed by fear of blame from mistresses,  
 What, brahmin, fearest thou that ever-thus  
 Thou goest down into the river?  
 Why with shivering limbs dost [thou] suffer bitter cold?

The brahman explains that he bathes in the icy cold water in order to wash off his sins and to seek release from his ill deeds. Punna's response then is:

Nay now, who, ignorant to the ignorant,  
 Hath told thee this: that water baptism  
 From evil karma can avail to free?  
 Why then the fishes and the tortoises  
 To frogs, the watersnakes, the crocodiles  
 And all that haunt the water

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 280–81.

Straight to heaven will go.  
Yea, all who evil karma [deeds] work.  
Thieves, murderers—so they but splash themselves  
With water, are from evil karma free;  
Evil thou hast wrought, they'd bear away  
Thy merit too, leaving thee stripped and bare  
To bathe and shiver here  
That even that, leave thou undone,  
And save thy skin from frost.<sup>22</sup>

Punna, by arguing in this way, establishes her intellectual superiority and succeeds in making the brahman understand that there is no easy absolution from evil actions. She also establishes her moral superiority by declining to accept a robe that the brahman offers her as a token of his esteem. In this too she scores a moral victory over the brahman whose caste is associated in the Buddhist texts with the unashamed pursuit of material gains from others in the form of *dakshina* (sacrificial fee) or *dana* (gift). Even in her poverty and misery, Punna, in a quiet and dignified manner, resolves the intellectual confrontation between the low and the high. But while she establishes her intellectual and moral superiority over the high-caste brahman who stands at the apex of society, Punna manages to simultaneously sidestep the social confrontation inherent in the interrogation of the brahman's system of beliefs.

To sum up, we may draw attention to certain issues that arise in this reading of the Buddhist texts and especially the Jataka stories. First, in these texts the low-status groups are released from their roles as objects of the rules, attention and focus of the elites and acquire a subjectivity. They think, act, laugh, weep, subvert and resist, as much as they fall in line, but even as they do so, they retain a degree of autonomy from the consciousness and perceptions of those who represent high culture. In fragments one can see elements of a popular vision of the world from below. But since the narratives are as much the creation of men who share, in part, the values of the upper classes—because it is they who record and represent the subjectivity of those at the bottom end—the emotions and ideas which the *dasas* and *dasis* display stop short of complete coherence. The texts

<sup>22</sup> *Therigatha (Psalms of the Sisters)*, translated by C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society, 1945), 116–19.

ultimately succeed in imprisoning the servile groups once more in the anonymity and obscurity from which the Jataka stories had momentarily rescued them. Once the purpose of the appropriation is achieved, the narrative itself is often cut short without telling us what happened to the key characters with whom we have begun to identify. We are left with only a faint glimpse of what it is like to be at the bottom end of society.

The Jataka stories also retain the notion of social hierarchy prevalent among Buddhists (where there were rich and poor according to differing access to the means of production, and high and low status according to the nature of work pursued). At the same time, they provide for the playing out of the dreams and fears of the lower classes (without, however, allowing transgressions to go beyond permissible limits) and permit the countering of the brahman's hegemonic control over ideology through transgressions originating in the intellectual arena. All this is achieved while retaining a popular genre of story-telling, and letting the text give out a multiplicity of meanings at the same time: ambiguous, subversive and re-affirmative.

What this reading of the textual sources for early India indicates is a counterpoint to the obtuseness of the paternalists (then and now) and the unwillingness to recognise the exploitative nature of the relations among masters and mistresses and servants. This is well brought out in an account in Buddhist texts. According to one source, there was once a mistress called Vaidehi who was famed for her good temper and gentle nature. One day her *dasi*, Kali, thought to herself: does my mistress really have a good temper or is it because I do my work so diligently and well that the mistress has such a good reputation? Kali then decided to test her mistress's real nature: she got up later and later on three successive mornings. Finally on the third morning the mistress's temper cracked and she hit Kali with a heavy iron bolt. Kali then displayed her blood-splattered head to the entire neighbourhood and this put an end to the myth of her mistress's 'gentle' temper. There is an acknowledgement in the story of the labour and diligence of the maidservant whose work is taken for granted and ignored, and those who perform the labour *know* that it is their labour that runs the household with such skill, even though they get no credit for it.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mahapandita Rahula Sankritayana and P. V. Bapat, eds, *Majjhima Nikaya*, Nalanda Devnagari Pali Series, vol. 1 (Nalanda: Bihar Government, 1958), 167–68.

Perhaps it is because of accounts such as this, going back to some of our earliest texts, that I find the complaints of modern-day mistresses who grumble about the women who labour for them—about their lack of skill, the unwillingly rendered labour, the absences from work, the high turnover in employment, the lack of loyalty, and so on—very irritating. It is rare to find a mistress who actually appreciates the work of a maidservant, while in contrast the daily capacity of a mistress to diminish her maidservant as a person is ubiquitous. There is both continuity and newness in domestic labour arrangements where exploitation and class relations are inflected in complicated ways. A historical examination of the past to understand the present will show us what is new and what is old and established in domestic servitude, just as the household itself is both old and new, retaining a stable core in the sexual division of labour and the relationship among masters, mistresses and servile labourers in terms of social relations that reproduce the household as an entity, as enduring as the family itself.





# I

## SERVANTS AND SERVICE

EARLY MODERN



# Domestic Service in Mughal South Asia

## An Intertextual Study

M. SAJJAD ALAM RIZVI\*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the variety of sources on domestic service/servitude in South Asia during the Mughal period. It aims to analyse diverse aspects of master–servant relationships by focusing on the ways in which the theme of personal service, what we could broadly refer as ‘domestic’, has been defined and conceptualised in these texts.<sup>1</sup> This essay aims to contribute to the expanding conceptual understanding

\*All translations from Persian, Arabic and Urdu are mine unless otherwise stated. I have followed the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* for transliteration and diacritics. This chapter is a revised version of the paper that I presented at the conference on ‘Servants’ Pasts, Sixteenth to Twentieth Century’, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi (16–18 February 2017). I thank the organisers for the invitation and the participants for their comments and questions. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. I express my thanks to Professor Prabhu Mohapatra and Professor Sunil Kumar for suggesting some valuable readings and to Nitin Sinha, Prabhat Kumar, Pankaj Jha and Nitin Verma for making valuable suggestions on the draft version of the chapter. However, errors, if any, are solely mine. Thanks are also due to Presidency University, Kolkata, for facilitating a research trip to Delhi.

<sup>1</sup> We are aware of the problems involved with the term ‘domestic’ in early modern period, and in fact, of the historical *hara-kiri* if we equate it with ‘private’ in an unproblematic way. See the ‘Introduction’ to this volume for further discussion on this. Also, Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

of domestic service as a category of historical analysis, and by doing so reverses the widespread tendency that frames histories of the domestic in teleological or ideological perspectives alone.

The relationship between the master (*mālik/āqā*) and the servant (*‘abd*, *banda/ghulām/mulāzim/naukar*) in Mughal South Asia has been discussed in various genres of Indo-Persian historical writings: juristic texts, moral digests and auto/biographical writings. These different genres have emphasised various aspects of this relationship. The issues of contract (*‘aqd al-ijārah*), wages (*ajr* or *‘iwaḍh*) and seclusion (with reference to the presence of domestic servants within the household) have been dealt within the juristic texts. The moral digests (such as *Akhilāq-i Nāṣiri*) have focused on the ethical and moral norms of domestic service which is based on an interdependent relationship between the master and the servant(s). Some of these digests contain a chapter titled ‘strict supervision of the servants (*khidam*, singular *khādim*) and slaves (*‘abid*, singular *‘abd*)’, and delineate the moral norms that have been postulated for the management of the household.<sup>2</sup> The auto/biographical accounts (such as the *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī ‘āt* of Jawhar Āftābchī, the ewer-bearer, who served the Mughal emperor Humāyūn) reveal aspects of personal and emotional relationship, which the authors reminisced. The chapter examines three texts from these three different genres of Indo-Persian sources. It closely looks at the use and meaning of various terms that were used to describe this relationship. It analyses the prescribed religious regulations and moral/ethical norms that framed this relationship in the wider context of the existing and normative values of social hierarchy, patronage and loyalty. Moving beyond the prescribed ethical notions, the auto/biographical accounts/memoirs allow us to discern the process of self-representation as well as the personal and emotional dimensions of this relationship.

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

The history of domestic service has not received ample scholarly attention in various strands of history writings on the Mughal empire. Works on

<sup>2</sup> These texts differentiate between the categories of ‘slave’ and ‘servant’ in terms of loyalty, trust and dependence. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

economic, social, family and labour histories of this period have made only passing references to the presence of domestic servants in various spheres of public and private life. The reasons for the lack of interest in the study of domestic service are the supposed 'unproductive nature' of this service and the lack of information.<sup>3</sup> Another reason could be the dominant framework of slavery that has reduced other forms of servitude within it. For example, W. H. Moreland deals with servants and slaves under the broader category of consuming classes and says that the 'amount of labour expended in the performance of personal services' was one of the outstanding economic facts of the age of Akbar. 'Some of them thus employed were free, while others were slaves, but the functions assigned to the two classes were to a great extent interchangeable, and for the present purpose it is sufficient to treat them as a single group.' However, his discussion of domestic labour is not based upon identifying them as labour but as markers of 'cultures of consumption.' He discusses this 'labour' only to show 'the extent to which productive forces [from agriculture and industry] were diverted to serve the purposes of luxury and display'.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of seeing them as a 'single group', Moreland differentiated between free men and slaves on the basis of wages and prices. The former were 'hired at rates which sufficed for a little more than a bare existence, and consequently look absurdly low when stated in terms of modern currency; a servant with no special qualifications cost about 1:1/2 rupees monthly at Akbar's Court, and perhaps 2 rupees on the west coast. The data on record regarding the price of slaves is too scanty to furnish a similar generalisation.'<sup>5</sup> K. M. Ashraf, on the other hand, while identifying 'the important class of domestics and slaves who were a familiar feature of every respectable Muslim home', reduced domestic service to the discussion

<sup>3</sup> Shireen Moosvi, 'Domestic Service in Precolonial India: Bondage, Caste and Market', in *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th–21st Centuries*, ed. Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004), 543.

<sup>4</sup> W. H. Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar: An Economic Study* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

on slavery.<sup>6</sup> He argues that 'manual labour becomes identified with slave labour and, therefore, discredited'.<sup>7</sup>

A very important essay in *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume I: c. 1200–c. 1750* by Irfan Habib also discussed domestic service under the category of slavery. Habib mentions that elite slaves, the *bandas* of the sultan, rose to the high ranks in the sultanate while the domestic or manual slaves (the *burdas*, *kanizaks*) ministered to the various needs of the higher and middle classes. He accepts that an 'economic historian should be more concerned with the economic conditions of these domestic slaves' but concedes that 'the information on this subject is very slight'.<sup>8</sup> In spite of the fairly extensive trade in slavery, the bulk of domestic services was provided by free labour in response to the market demand. Servants catered to a widely felt need for their labour and did so at a price. Therefore, Tapan Raychaudhuri questions the servants' work being classified as

<sup>6</sup> K. M. Ashraf, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), 103. Ashraf writes,

The most important section of these domestics was comprised of male and female slaves... A special class of slaves was employed for the care of the female inmates of the haram. The latter were usually bought in childhood and castrate[d]... Female slaves were of two kinds: those employed for domestic and menial work, and others bought for personal company and pleasure. The former, wanting in education and skill and bought expressly for rough domestic work were often subjected to all sorts of indignities; the latter had a more honourable and sometimes even a dominating position in the household.

<sup>7</sup> Ashraf, *Life and Conditions*, 106–07. In his book on slavery, K. S. Lal deals with the 'employment of slaves' and mentions domestic service only in passing. He too conflated domestic servants with slaves and confined his study to the Sultan's palaces due to 'the shortage of space and paucity of detailed information about the employment of slaves in the household of nobles and other important Muslim elites'. Thereafter, he mentioned the *ghilman* (slave boys) and *mamaliks* (eunuchs) and concubinage to delineate the sexual perversion of the ruling elites. Surprising enough, K. S. Lal consulted the *Fatawa-i-Alamgiri* which he considers as 'the most important source book for Muslim law in India', but he did not refer to the chapter dealing with hiring domestic servants for household works. See K. S. Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1994), 99–100, 141.

<sup>8</sup> Irfan Habib, 'Non-Agricultural Production and Urban Economy', in *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume I: c. 1200–c. 1750*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 92.

uneconomic.<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging the need to bring 'service' performed in households into the fold of economic activity, the servants' presence as a marker of status was not lost on him. He argued, the

vast array of servants and slaves was a characteristic feature of the life-style of the period. Notions of conspicuous consumption and comfortable life included the services of a large number of men and women, for display as well as minutely specialized functions. This was true, not only of the very affluent, but of 'everybody, even of mean fortune.'<sup>10</sup>

It is from within the paradigm of 'slavery' that Irfan Habib suggests to differentiate between elite slavery and ordinary slavery, although technically the same provisions of the *shari'a* applied to both.<sup>11</sup> It is in this context that he has discussed domestic service. However, he too laments the lack of satisfactory evidence to write about ordinary slaves, who were to be found in the cities, 'possibly because in the work taken from them, there was no difference between them and ordinary domestic servants. Even the fact that their conditions were necessarily worse than domestic servants is not certain.'<sup>12</sup>

Irfan Habib, in his discussion of the labourers and artisans, writes: 'Another source of addition to the numbers of Muslim artisans was the increasingly large bodies of slaves that military expeditions and rural raids produced. Not only were these slaves used for unskilled, domestic

<sup>9</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Non-Agricultural Production: 1 Mughal India', in *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume I*, 304. See Dharma Kumar's article on the need to study the 'service economy' as a neglected field in South Asian history writing. Dharma Kumar, 'The Forgotten Sector: Services in Madras Presidency in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 24, no. 4, 1987, 367–93.

<sup>10</sup> Raychaudhuri, 'Non-Agricultural Production', 304.

<sup>11</sup> Irfan Habib, 'Slavery', in *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization, Volume VII, Part I: The State and Society in Medieval India*, eds J. S. Grewal and D. P. Chattopadhyaya (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 434.

<sup>12</sup> Habib, 'Slavery', 438. Habib has discussed the prices of the slaves for domestic attendance either for menial work or for personal company and pleasure. These slaves include female slaves for domestic work or concubinage, handsome boys, adult slave workers and untrained boys for domestic work. Habib, 'Slavery', 433.



work, but also trained for skilled professions.<sup>13</sup> According to Habib, a large number of unskilled labourers were kept outside regular employment and had to offer themselves for daily hire.<sup>14</sup> He also says that the wages were fixed mainly by the force of supply and demand. But there were other factors too. The large presence of slavery must have put pressure on the wages of free labourers, just as, conversely, in time, low wages, through an ample supply of labour, could have undermined the economic viability of slavery, especially outside domestic service. Moreover, free labour was not always free. Authorities felt entitled to extort forced labour (*begār*) from large number of people.<sup>15</sup>

It is very clear that in the early modern period, as well as in early colonial times, it is highly difficult to differentiate between slaves and servants. As Richard M. Eaton and Indrani Chatterjee have argued, the 'barriers between slave and non-slave status were often quite permeable'.<sup>16</sup> The contributors to the volume edited by Eaton and Chatterjee 'have paid special attention to the shifting boundaries between slave and non-slave as they have pondered over the use of slaves or the nature of the reproduction of slave status. Cumulatively, then, they offer a picture of slaves and non-slave servants coexisting between the ninth and the

<sup>13</sup> Irfan Habib, 'Labourers and Artisans', in *History of Science, Volume VII, Part I*, 169.

<sup>14</sup> Irfan Habib, 'Forms of Labour', in *History of Science, Volume VII, Part I*, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Habib, 'Forms of Labour', 112. Neelam Chaudhary's study of labour in Mughal India focuses on various forms of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour and the prevalent wage structure. However, her analysis is not very enlightening for the theme/study of domestic service. Like W. H. Moreland, she cites Abul Fazl for details about the wages of the domestic workers and servants in a few tables. Among the skilled as well as the unskilled labour, Chaudhary mentions the servants (who received monthly wages) in the imperial harem for various menial duties, *chelas* (who received contractual wages) as personal attendants. See Neelam Chaudhary, *Labour in Mughal India* (New Delhi: Aravali Books International, 1998), 56, 79–81. This, however, illustrates how contemporary sources, such as the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, considered domestic service as a distinct category in which both free men and slaves were employed.

<sup>16</sup> Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds, *Slavery & South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4. Also see, Moosvi, 'Domestic Service in Precolonial India'. For early colonial period, see Margot Finn, 'Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, c. 1780–1830', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19, 2009, 181–203.

nineteenth centuries, while they outline the subtle shifts between one and the other'.<sup>17</sup>

What indeed is also visible is the power of the language of 'slavery' in professing loyalty to the higher authority. The imperial officers in Mughal South Asia routinely styled themselves as slaves of the emperor by using the rhetoric of slavery as a metaphor for political loyalty.<sup>18</sup> While it is important to keep the blurred historical reality between slaves and servants in mind, we also need to simultaneously explore the contexts of our sources in which the distinction between them is foregrounded. Their separation would not be essentially captured in the terminology, that is, we cannot perhaps draw neat boundaries between them, but their distinctions are marked in the narrative itself. The texts which I have looked at, for instance, allow us to differentiate between slaves and servants on the basis of norms of loyalty. The predominance of the 'slavery' category needs to be redefined in order to attempt to unearth a more graded past of servitude, especially of the domestic nature.<sup>19</sup>

Most works dealing with domestic servants have focused on slavery, production and market. Therefore, the history of domestic service, as a distinct analytical and historical category, has not received scholarly attention. In what follows, I discuss three texts from three different genres to analyse the different (legal, ethical and personal/emotional) dimensions of domestic service in Mughal South Asia. The paucity of scholarly studies is not because there is a lack of information but that it is scattered in various historical, auto/biographical and normative texts, an aspect that makes the construction or reconstruction of the history of domestic service in Mughal South Asia extremely difficult.

Through this study, I show that the contemporary sources (especially legal and ethical texts) do refer to domestic servants as a distinct category or group.<sup>20</sup> Although this category is ubiquitous in contemporary sources, it is invisible because of the historiographical leanings and ideological positions

<sup>17</sup> Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery & South Asian History*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

<sup>19</sup> The easy slide into 'slavery' from the professed attempt to write the history of domestic servants is visible in Moosvi, 'Domestic Service in Precolonial India.'

<sup>20</sup> For the use of 'people of service i.e. servants (*arbāb-i khidmat*)', also see Shaykh Abu'l Fazl Allami, *Ā'in-i Akbarī* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1872), 5.

that have excluded domestic labour from serious analytical investigation, especially due to the complexity of domestic service in Mughal South Asia. I will discuss this theme in three sections. First, I investigate the ethical norms prescribed for the master–servant relationship. Second, I discuss the legal opinions/rulings that governed the contract between the master and the servant(s). Third, I analyse an auto/biographical account to show shifts in these relations in specific historical context. These sections are followed by a conclusion, where I summarise the findings and argue that study of ethical norms, juristic rulings and auto/biographical accounts suggests that an intertextual study of the broad spectrum of texts from different genres will enhance and broaden our understanding of the history of domestic service/servitude in Mughal South Asia.

## ETHICAL NORMS AND DOMESTIC SERVICE

Moral and ethical norms for the purification of the self, the management of the household and the administration of the state have been discussed in texts which are classified as *ādāb* and *akhlāq* and are described under the term ‘mirrors of princes’ literature. The term *akhlāq* (singular *khuluq*; literally ‘innate disposition’) refers to ethical and moral norms. Drawing from different sources (pre-Islamic Arabian tradition and Qur’anic teaching with non-Arabic elements, mainly of Persian and Greek origins), Muslim scholars (traditionalists, mystics, philosophers and advisers to the rulers and civil servants) contributed to the development of this tradition. They, however, tried in various ways ‘to conform to the basic standards of Islam’.<sup>21</sup> Moral thoughts of Persian and Greek origins were introduced and integrated with the Islamic tradition through the efforts of scholars such as Abu ‘Ali Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Miskawih (936–1030) and Abu Hamid Muhammad b. al-Ghazali (1058–1111).

These *akhlāqī* texts or ‘mirrors for princes’ were meant to impart advice to rulers and high-ranking administrators. The designation ‘mirrors for princes’ has often been used as a synonym for the more general category

<sup>21</sup> R. Walzer and H. A. R. Gibb, ‘AKHLĀK’, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb, J. H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provencal and J. Schacht, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 325–29.

of advice literature and applied to a variety of written texts as long as they serve an advisory purpose. Modern scholarship has firmly established the importance of these texts in the context of medieval political thought. The *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* of Abu 'Alī Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Miskawaih is the most influential work on philosophical ethics. The perpetual influence of Miskawaih's work is discernible in later-day Persian literature. Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274; a philosopher, scientist and major *Shi'ī* theologian) closely followed Miskawaih in his *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, which is one of the most influential Persian medieval works on politics, ethics and statecraft. Besides the first discourse, which was a summary of Ibn Miskawaih's *Tahdhīb*, Tusi added two new discourses—one on the household and family management (*tadbīr-i manzil*), and the other on politics (*siyāsat-imudun*)—as parts of practical wisdom (*hikmat-i 'amalī*). The *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* had many imitators and became the standard work on political ethics and statecraft in the three early modern Muslim empires: the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal. This text was remodelled in later works such as *Akhlāq-i Jalālī* of Jalal al-Din Dawwani (d. 1502), *Akhlāq-i Muḥssinī* of Husain Wa'iz al-Kashifi (d. 1504–05) and *Akhlāq-i Humāyūnī* of Qazi Ikhtiyar al-Din al-Husaini (d. after 1556). According to Muzaffar Alam, the Mughals appropriated the *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* as a legacy of Zahir al-Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), the founder of their rule in India, who in turn had received it from the Timurids of Herat. Tusi's book was not only among the five most important books that Abul Fazl wanted Emperor Akbar to have read out to him regularly, it was also among the most favoured readings of the Mughal political elites: with the emperor having issued/issuing instructions to his officials to read Tusi and Rumi, in particular. The imprint of *akhlāq* literature is discernible in texts such as the *Ā'in-i Akbari*, the *Mau'izah-i Jahāgīrī* and a large number of Mughal edicts.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Two recensions of Tusi's work were *Akhlāq-i Muḥssinī* by Husain Wa'iz al-Kashifi and *Dastūr al-Wizārat* or *Akhlāq-i Humāyūnī* by Qazi Ikhtiyar al-Din al-Husaini, prepared at the behest of Sultan Husain Bayqara (r. 1470–1506), the last great Timurid in Herat. Ikhtiyar al-Din al-Husaini, the chief *qāḍī* of Herat and a *wazīr* in the time of the Timurid Sultan Husain Bayqara, prepared the earlier version of his book in the time of Sultan Abu Sa'id Mirza (1459–69), but he revised this treatise for Babur and renamed it as *Akhlāq-i Humāyūnī*. Babur's descendants, however, do not seem to have greatly relished Ikhtiyar al-Husaini's simplified recension of the works of Ibn Miskawaih and

The term for 'domestic space' in this text was *manzil* (literally, descending or alighting as a stranger or guest and translated as a house, hotel, lodging, dwelling, mansion, habitation, a caravanserai, inn or place for the accommodation of fort travellers, among others). However, Tusi explained that the meaning of the household (*manzil*) in this context is not construed through material and physical nature; it did not matter whether the dwelling (*maskan*) was of wood or stone, a tent or pavilion, the shade of a tree or a cave in the mountain.<sup>23</sup> The household, rather, referred to a particular combination of relationships (*ta'lif*) between wife and husband, father and child, master (*makhdūm*) and servant (*khādim*), and property and its possessor. The five bases (*arkān*) of the house were: father, mother, child, servant and sustenance (*qūt*). Thereafter, he described the norms governing the management of property and the arrangements for sustenance (*amwāl wa aqwāt*). He followed this up with suggestions on how to maintain interpersonal relationships among the members.

The terms for servants were *khidam* (plural of *khādim*; servant) and 'abid (plural of 'abd; bondman; slave) under the heading, *darsiyāst-i khidamwa 'abid* (the government of servants and slaves).

The use of 'abid and *khidam* shows that Tusi differentiates between slaves and servants. This also becomes clear later in the text when Tusi uses the terms *banda* and *āzād* to highlight the virtues of loyalty and submission.

In delineating their significance, Tusi said that it should be clear to all that within the household, servants and slaves resembled the hands, feet and other parts of the body of the master. They substituted for the master's bodily exertions by providing labour. This analogy of the servants as being mapped on to the parts of the master's body existed in other traditions as well.<sup>24</sup> But in Tusi's view, because of this, servants were seen as gifts of

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Tusi. Introduced to that world through the *Akhlāq-i Humāyūnī*, they preferred to read and understand for themselves the fuller (even if convoluted) original texts. For details see, Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004), 46–69.

<sup>23</sup> Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Akhlāq-i Nāsirī* (Calcutta: Matba' Quddusi, 1269 A. H.), 214; G. M. Wickens, *The Nasirean Ethics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 154.

<sup>24</sup> See Carolyn Steedman, 'The Servant's Labour: The Business of Life, England, 1760–1820', *Social History* 29, no. 1, 2004, 1–29.

god and the master was enjoined to express gratitude to Him by showing benevolence, gentleness, affability, equity and justice towards the servants and slaves and by refraining from practising oppression and tyranny.<sup>25</sup>

This providential origin of servants was perhaps a linguistic ploy to emphasise the articulation of the relationship through conjoined bodily comportment or to remind masters to remain benevolent, otherwise the more practical aspect of the hiring, according to Tusi, required a very careful check on the moral qualities of the domestic servants. According to him, the master should acquire a thorough knowledge of the person's behaviour and character (*aḥwāl*) before he sought his services (*istikhdām*). If, however, this could not be achieved, the master needed to exercise his physiognomic insight, and intuition and conjecture. Tusi believed that physical features and appearances influenced moral dispositions of the human beings. He, therefore, asked to avoid employing servants with physical disabilities or those who appeared shrewd and cunning as these people were most likely to inflict fraud and deceit.<sup>26</sup> Modesty and only a little intelligence were to be preferred over a great vigour of mind.<sup>27</sup>

However, it should be noted that Tusi has prescribed different criteria for choosing servants and slaves. Here, he is content with 'small intelligence', while in mentioning the works that should be assigned to the servants and the slaves, he says that one should take for one's personal service the more intelligent, the wiser, the more eloquent servants, and those with a greater share of modesty and piety. For commercial enterprises, one needed those who were competent, more capable and more acquisitive. The cultivation of estates calls for those with a tendency to strength, toughness and the capacity for hard work; while the grazing of flocks is best carried out by those with stout hearts and loud voices and no great inclination to sleep.<sup>28</sup> This also shows that in the *akhlāq* texts, domestic service encompasses a range of works from personal service to grazing animals.

In the *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, social distinctions such as religion or caste did not determine the occupational and social hierarchy. However, Tusi

<sup>25</sup> Tusi, *Akhlāq*, 255–56; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 181.

<sup>26</sup> It is no surprise then that servants with physical deformity are ridiculed and laughed at. See the 'Introduction' to this volume.

<sup>27</sup> Tusi, *Akhlāq*, 256; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 182.

<sup>28</sup> Tusi, *Akhlāq*, 58–59; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 183.

did differentiate between servants on the basis of legal status and ethnic/regional variations. A slave was better fitted for domestic service than a free man, for a slave was more inclined to accept the obedience to the master and train himself in accordance to the master's dispositions and manners. He was also more likely to despair at (the prospect of) the separation from the master.<sup>29</sup> This is important as Tusi makes a clear distinction between a slave and a free servant. Slaves were more preferable because of the dependence, thus leading to deeper commitment to remain loyal.

In his exposition of the moral qualities and physical features, Tusi also differentiated between domestic servants with reference to their ethnic and regional variations. Among the classes of nations (*umam*), the Arabs were distinguished for their speech, eloquence and ingenuity, but they were also noted for their harshness and colossal appetite. The Persians, on the other hand, were known for their intelligence, agility, cleanliness and sagacity, albeit, also for their greed and cunning disposition. The Byzantines were loyal, trustworthy, affectionate and competent, but also stingy and mean. Indians had compassion but were prone to conceit, malevolence, guile and fabrication. Finally, the Turks were courageous and were worthy of service (also had a fine appearance) but were notoriously treacherous, cold-blooded and brash.<sup>30</sup> However, Tusi did not specify if he thought of any particular ethnic group to be particularly suitable for the work of servant.

According to Tusi, each domestic servant was to be appointed according to his ability/qualification (*ṣalāḥiyat*), and once assigned, not to be transferred from one sort of work (*kār*) to another and from one craft (*ṣanāʿat*) to another. Each of them had a natural inclination for a certain kind of task. So, while ability, qualification and moral character were to be judged, these were also, according to Tusi, predetermined; the master, by attending the needs of the servants, was also supposed to make servants realise the potential of their 'natural inclination'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in his conceptualisation of domestic service, Tusi did not think of 'social

<sup>29</sup> Tusi, *Akhlaq*, 59; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 183.

<sup>30</sup> Tusi, *Akhlaq*, 259; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 184.

<sup>31</sup> Tusi, *Akhlaq*, 256–57; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 182.

mobility' and that is why he asked the masters to assign specific tasks to the servants for which they had the qualification and expertise.

The text did not only conceptualise a morally ideal servant or slave in the context of the domestic service within the household but also prescribed norms and advices for the master's conduct. Situating master-servant relationship between loyalty and patronage, Tusi postulated that the masters' compassion and affection would win over the loyalty of the servants. He, however, also advised the master to show his power of judgement and determination to draw unflinching loyalty from the servant. Such a course not only conformed to the appropriate display of generosity but also made servants observe the essential requirements of compassion and affection, conformity and carefulness. These were the ways in which the 'conjoined bodily comportment' were to be perfected, which was the ideal of the master-servant relationship. Tusi made an interesting observation that if the servant perceived the master to be weak in judgement and feeble in conduct, which could lead to his dismissal for any single offence, then he would consider himself only as being hired ('*āriyat*') to his service. He would treat himself as 'transient' (separate from the master) and hence not give proper thought to any task, nor would observe the requirements of compassion. He would be ready to leave the master on any occasion of ill-treatment.<sup>32</sup> This would not happen if the master observed generosity and determination, which would make the servant recognise himself as a partner and a participant in the grace and wealth of the one he served (*makhdūm*). He would feel secure from dismissal or transfer.

The tenor of the relationship was to be based upon emotional attachment instead of fear and hope. Tusi made masters responsible for taking care of the needs of the servants. In his view, the basic principle governing the service of the servants was love, rather than hope or fear. The feeling of love and affect, according to Tusi, would transform the servants into good counsellors (*khidmat-ināsihāna*), as against (bad) slaves (*khidmat-i bad bandgān*). The master should take care of the servants' livelihood in matters of food, dress and other provisions. At times, they should be allowed ease and rest. That would keep them cheerful

<sup>32</sup> Tusi, *Akhlaq*, 57; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 182.



and diligent at the task and prevent from being languor and sloth.<sup>33</sup> A moderation in matters of punishment was prescribed. For minor offences, the master ought to practice forgiveness but if the servant made any lewd offence or displayed vile iniquity, he was to be dismissed. A hazy picture of 'servants' sociability' based on the masters' fear of 'hidden script' could be drawn from one of the remarks made by Tusi: the dismissal of the erring servant was important to prevent his bad company ruining other servants as well.<sup>34</sup> Domestic service in this conceptualisation was ideally based upon affect and love.

The text emphasised patronage and loyalty for the smooth functioning of the master-servant relationship. The set of ethical norms structuring this relationship delineated the qualities of a good servant, but it also prescribed the norms masters had to observe to maintain the relationship. In other words, the self of the master was also under construction in this process. The stage at which the ethical and affective interdependence played out was not only limited to the field of moral conduct. The idea of body was equally important: in terms of physical appearances, natural disposition and in the overall ideal template of servants being mapped on to the body parts of the master. We have noticed that the *akhlāqī* texts refer to the class hierarchy, legal status, and ethnic and regional identities as markers of social distinction unlike the legal texts that bring out gender, religion and age into the discussion besides the legal position and status of the servants.

## DOMESTIC SERVICE IN LEGAL TEXTS

The term *fatāwā* refers to the corpus of texts that contain legal and juristic opinions or advices for actual or hypothetical situations. The juristic opinions of Muslim scholars in response to a variety of queries, compiled in a book form, are known as *fatāwā*. Several such collections had already been produced in India before the Mughals came to the Subcontinent. *Al-Fatāwā al-Ālamgīriyya*, also known as *al-Fatāwā al-Hindiyya*, is one such collection of juristic rulings compiled in Arabic by a board of Ḥanafī scholars, which was headed by Shaykh Nizam of Burhanpur (d.

<sup>33</sup> Tusi, *Akhlāq*, 58; Wickens, *Nasirean Ethics*, 183.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

1679). The text was compiled between 1664 and 1672 in Delhi. It was done on the order of the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), who wanted ‘to present a consensus of Hanafi School of law, to streamline different interpretations of *sharīʿa* and to use them for state purposes.’<sup>35</sup> The multi-volume collection contains the most authoritative decisions by earlier legists which were scattered in a number of books of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and thus provides a convenient work of reference.<sup>36</sup> This collection of *fatāwā* constitutes the most comprehensive compendia of Ḥanafī law and has been repeatedly published in original and Urdu translation. It continues to be an influential text for the political history of the period as well as a reference book for Muslim jurists.

According to Jamal Malik, such a juridical codification emerging out of a collective endeavour was something new, which could be said to have anticipated the emergence of modern state legislation. Malik says that this compilation became authoritative because it provided a review of *al-Hidaya*, the most popular Ḥanafī compendium written by Ali ibn Abi Bakr al-Marghinani (d. 1197), as well as those of other *fatāwā* compilations produced by Indian Muslims such as *Fatāwā-i Ghiyathī* (ascribed to Ghiyath al-Din Balaban, r. 1266–86) and *Fatāwā-i Tātār Khānī* (during the rule of Firoz Shah Tughluq, r. 1351–88). Aurangzeb supported the attempt to impose a clearly defined and homogenised legal system. Thus, he patronised Muslim scholars and institutions of Islamic learning to strengthen Muslim orthodoxy towards securing legitimacy for the royalty. The scholars were to compile, systematise and review the Ḥanafī law to aid *qāḍīs* and *muftīs* in their work.<sup>37</sup>

In *Al-Fatāwā al-ʿĀlamgīriyya*, domestic service has been discussed in a chapter on *istijāra lil khidmat* (hiring in for service). The master is described as the *mustājir* (employer; leaseholder) and the servant as the *ajir* (hireling; workman; day-labourer; employee). Both these words come

<sup>35</sup> Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012), 193–94.

<sup>36</sup> A. S. Bazmee Ansari, ‘al-Fatāwā al-ʿĀlamgīriyya’, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht, 2nd edn, vol. 2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 837.

<sup>37</sup> Malik, *Islam in South Asia*, 194–96. See also Alan M. Guenther, ‘Hanafi Fiqh in Mughal India: The Fatāwā-i ʿĀlamgīrī’, in *India’s Islamic Traditions, 771–1750*, ed. Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 209–30.

from *ijārah* (hiring out or letting on lease), which implies a contract or agreement on *khidmat* (service) with specified time and place in return for a fixed rate of remunerations and wages.<sup>38</sup> The agreement could be made between two free persons as well as a slave and a free person. The servant would be bound to perform only those works or duties which were mentioned in the terms and conditions of the agreement. These *fatāwā* discuss domestic service in reference to gender, kinship, legal status, religion and age of the servants. The focus is on the nature of the household chores and the domestic space.

One of the juristic rulings enumerated some of the tasks that an employee was required to discharge.<sup>39</sup> The employer could assign any task or service required in the house (*khidmat al-bayt*) to the servant ('abd). These included washing, stitching, sewing, kneading dough, baking breads and providing fodder to the livestock, both at farm and household.<sup>40</sup> According to one juristic ruling, it was permissible for the employer to ask the employee to carry his luggage on his back to and from his house, to milk his goats and to fetch water from the well.<sup>41</sup> Together these rulings indicate a wide variety of tasks a servant was required to discharge within the household and beyond.

While the household and the farm were not absolutely separate spaces, the juristic rulings (*fatāwā*) differentiated between the services sought within the household and outside of it. The axis of this differentiation was the house and the market. One of the rulings mentioned that the master could not appoint a domestic servant to sit as a professional tailor in a shop or in any other profession even if the servant was an expert in those trades.<sup>42</sup> The idea of the domestic servant was here tied to the notion of personal attendance and service whose labour was not to be employed for producing goods and services with an exchange value in the market.

<sup>38</sup> Shaykh Nizam Burhanpuri, ed., *al-Fatāwā al-Hindiyya*, Vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar Sādir, 1991 Reprint), 434.

<sup>39</sup> In this section, I translate *ajir* as employee/servant and *mustājir* as employer or master. However, servant and master in the legal text always refer to the employee and employer, respectively.

<sup>40</sup> Burhanpuri, *al-Fatāwā al-Hindiyya*, 435.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Alternatively, the master could have had an *ijārah*, the contract, for tasks performed in the market, in which case the work at house would not be included. Juridical rulings, therefore, carved a distinct category of domestic labour by limiting the boundaries where tasks would be performed.

Going beyond the site of work, some rulings tell us about gender boundaries in the performance of hired domestic work. According to one ruling, although permissible, it was *makrūh* (disliked) for a man to hire a free or slave woman for domestic service if he would be alone with her in the house as the company with a strange woman in seclusion (*khalwat*) was forbidden. The man with the family of dependents (*ʿayāl*) was allowed still with the same prescription of not being alone with her.<sup>43</sup> This discussion about observing the norms of seclusion and veil did not address the hypothetical situation of a female employer hiring a male servant for domestic services. However, one can infer that rulings, in a situation like this, would have remained the same.

The husband–wife relationship, when it came to work done by the wife in the household, was also explained in terms of wages and contract, symbolising the pervasiveness of the master–servant relationship. According to a ruling, it was impermissible for a man to hire his wife on a monthly specified amount of wage. It was also impermissible to hire her for any of the household tasks (*aʿmāl al-bayt*) such as baking bread, cooking food and breastfeeding her child. What was getting defined through these rulings was the notion and duties of the woman herself. By not allowing wages for these tasks, the innateness of the female gender was put forth, because in another ruling it was made permissible for her to demand wages if she provided services outside of the realm of the domestic (*laisa min jinse khidmat al-bayt*) such as grazing/tending domestic animals and other similar tasks. As a wife, these tasks were not incumbent (*mustḥaqq*) upon her to perform, so she could demand wages.<sup>44</sup> One can also argue that a wife, even though she was not a domestic servant in theory, was practically an unpaid servant of her husband in the household. This becomes manifest when we look at the situation when a wife would have hired her husband

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 434–35. The spatial and gendered construction of domestic work and domesticity as explained in the ‘Introduction’ to this volume can be seen to be at work in these examples.

for a personal service or tending animals. The *fatāwā* says that there were different juristic opinions on this matter. In one of them, it was considered as an invalid contract while in another it was deemed valid but the husband was given the choice to cancel the contract.<sup>45</sup> The status of this woman, whom we have been labelling wife, was however important. These rulings were applicable only on a free woman and not a slave woman. A slave girl/woman could not have demanded wages for work performed either inside or outside of the household.

In discussing domestic service performed by kinsmen and relatives, one ruling mentioned that it was not valid (*jā'z*) to hire parents even if both of them were free persons, slaves or non-Muslims. However, they would get the wages if they have discharged their duties. In the same way, it would be invalid to hire grandfather and grandmother but if these kins had rendered domestic service, then they could rightfully claim their fixed wages, which would not be retrospectively lowered if they were higher than the customary ones. These examples show that although medieval and early modern households were expansive and based upon multiple kin-formation, there were restrictions on the closest of the kin (parents and grandparents) to be hired as servants. In the case of wife, as noted, the legal distinction based on wage and the site of work 'gendered' her role as specific but also unpaid. There would not be any difference between the son being a free person or a slave, a Muslim or a non-Muslim. This ruling was based on the conceptual difference between *duty* and *service* as children were duty-bound to take care of their parents. However, hiring of brothers and all other relatives for domestic service (*khidmat*) was declared valid.<sup>46</sup>

The *fatāwā* also discussed the issue of domestic service that involved persons of different religious denomination. In this context, they differentiated between services performed within the household and ones discharged outside of it. For instance, one of the *fatāwā* mentioned, it would be valid for a Muslim to hire himself/herself out to a non-Muslim for domestic services but it was disagreeable (*makrūh*) to do so as it would lead to humiliation. Hiring out for cultivation and irrigation was,

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 435.

however, not disagreeable.<sup>47</sup> The ruling did not discuss the situation in which a Muslim hired a non-Muslim for domestic service. Finally, in the case of children who had the ability to perform domestic work, it was said that their fathers, grandfathers and guardians could allow them to be employed by others.<sup>48</sup>

Although these juristic rulings have normative overtones and sometimes discuss even hypothetical situations, one is tempted to surmise that the inclusion of such rulings in the collection of *fatāwā* indicated that the 'terms of contract' were violated in a society in which the jurists were postulating such rulings to settle cases. The juristic rulings did not mention any specific case of dispute between the master and servant. However, one ruling referred to the role of the judge (qāḍī) and the written or verbal proof (*bayyinah*) in settling a dispute involving the slave, the master of the slave and the employer.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the juristic rulings defined domestic service in terms of contract and remuneration. They prescribed different codes of master-servant relationship based upon gender, kinship, religion, age and space (the household or the market) as well as the nature of domestic work. One of the features of these *fatāwā* is that they have been recorded with references to a particular text or an individual or a group of scholars. At times, these juristic opinions also referred to 'customs' and 'habits' of a particular region. The stated aim behind the compilation of the *Al-Fatāwā al-Ālamgīriyya/al-Fatāwā al-Hindiyya* was to prepare a digest of the preferable juristic opinions of the early scholars. How far they actually governed or represented the social reality is difficult to ascertain. From the references and preferences that have been appended to the reordered juristic opinions, however, we can conclude that shari'a was not a fixed set of rules and regulations. It was subject to various, and sometimes different, interpretations.

<sup>47</sup> In Islamic jurisprudential terminology, *makrūh* (literally 'detestable' or 'abominable') implies something that is a disliked or an offensive act, one of the five categories in Islamic law: *wajib/fard* (obligatory), *mustahabb* (recommended), *ḥalāl/mubāh* (permitted), *makrūh* (disapproved) and *ḥarām* (forbidden).

<sup>48</sup> Burhanpuri, *al-Fatāwā al-Hindiyya*, 436.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

## MASTER-SERVANT RELATIONSHIP IN AUTO/ BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS

Jawhar Āftābchī, a domestic servant who discharged the duty of ewer-bearer for Humāyūn, the second Mughal emperor, wrote a memoir which has been classified by Taymiya R. Zaman as an auto/biographical writing in early Mughal India.<sup>50</sup> The text, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī'āt* (Remembrance of Happenings/Events; Memoir), was put together in 1578.<sup>51</sup> Ruby Lal has also considered this text as a contemporary autobiographical account, a rather 'candid' one.<sup>52</sup> Both Zaman and Lal have analysed the text from different perspectives. Zaman traces the auto/biographical features of the self and self-representation while Lal explores it to reconstruct the 'domestic world' of the peripatetic emperors in early Mughal India. However, in both these studies, Āftābchī's own presence is less accounted for; he is used for explaining something else; either the formation of the self or the nature of the domesticity.

In what follows, I focus on the relationship between a domestic servant and his master as described in the text. This text is also important as it was composed by a servant of a peripatetic emperor whose household was on the move before the Mughals under Akbar developed a highly mature imperial courtly culture which prescribed a well-formulated and institutional set-up for the imperial household and where the emperors were insulated from ordinary service providers through layers and layers of rituals, protocols and intermediaries. The specific historical context of the text was when the master (Humāyūn) had lost his empire to the Afghans and was in exile. I look at the practices and techniques of representation and self-representation and the role of memory in the text. Written as a memoir which straddles between biography and autobiography, it can be read as a first-person direct account of a servant who tried to show a

<sup>50</sup> Taymiya R. Zaman, 'Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54, no. 5, 2011, 677–700.

<sup>51</sup> Jawhar Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī'āt*, ed. Sajida Sherwani (Rampur: Raza Library, 2015). For an abridged translation of this text, see Charles Stewart, *The Tezkereh Al Vakiāt or Private Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humāyūn, Written in the Persian Language by Jouher* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1832).

<sup>52</sup> Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 54.

progression in the construction of the self in terms of loyalty, service and entitlement to the royal favours.

Āftābchī showed that the loyalty of the servants to the king was highly desirable when his own family members were capricious and given to disloyalty. Āftābchī used to carry water for Humāyūn for drinking and ablution purposes; he massaged his master's body and guarded his possessions. His loyalty to his king who was in exile and his endeavours to help his master meet high moral standards and portray him as an exemplary. Āftābchī claimed that he attended to Humāyūn in all conditions and circumstances and that his narrative of events testified to the grace and strength of character with which Humāyūn withstood hardships and regained his throne in Delhi. What we notice here is that the construction of the self of the servant and the master is happening simultaneously. While Āftābchī, through his narrative, portrays himself as the loyal servant of the master, he at the same time also glorifies the character of his master. In this text, we find a resonance of norms and codes of conduct, prescribed in the ethical texts, in the presentation and representation of the idealised master-servant relationship. This is reflected in how Āftābchī illustrated his loyalty to his master who in return provided patronage to him, and how he tried to project strong emotional bonds with his master. However, Āftābchī often negotiated these norms in specific and contingent contexts and this differentiates this self-account of the servant from the ethical texts which have normative overtones.

Āftābchī did not provide any coherent description about himself. He mentioned about his employment in the third person: Jawhar, the humble servant (*banda-i dha'if*) of the court (*dargah*), the asylum of mankind, had the good fortune and divine favour (*sa 'dat-i azal wa 'ināyat-i ḥadhrat-i lam yazal*), while still of a young age (*dar 'ahd-i ṭufūliyat*), to be admitted into the service of his Majesty Humāyūn to kiss the sky-high court. He was at all times and in all situations, in constant attendance (*khidmat*) to the royal person (*ḥudhūr/huzur*). The very idea of compiling the text, in his own reasoning, was to express his gratitude for the blessing and benediction he felt he received being a servant.<sup>53</sup> In this passage, he described himself as *banda* (literally slave) and considered his employment at the royal

<sup>53</sup> Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī 'āt*, 1–3; Stewart, *Tezkereh*, 1.



court as a divine favour. It is interesting to note that while Tusi exhorted the masters to treat servants and slaves as gifts of god, this perception was mutually shared by servants the other way around, that is, the gift of service was the gift of god.

In a separate passage, Āftābchī did mention in some detail how he got the job of *ābdār* (water carrier). Before Humāyūn left, he had asked some of his servants to proceed to Lahore and make preparations for his arrival in the city. A servant named Harpai, who was the existing *ābdār*, expressed his desire to accompany these servants to Lahore, which was his birthplace and where his family lived. Humāyūn inquired about the person who would do the work in his absence.<sup>54</sup> One Khwaja Sultan Ali Bakhsh proposed his brother's name but the emperor declined. Harpai was allowed to go to Lahore and Āftābchī mentions in the text that the bottle was given to the humble (*khāksār*) Jawhar. Harpai, who had gone some distance, doubted if he would ever get back the emperor's bottle if it was entrusted with other servants (*khidmatgārān*; singular *khidmatgār*). He repented and returned the same night. The bottle was already entrusted to Jawhar, the poor and humble (*faqīr* and *khāksār*). Āftābchī sought the emperor's permission before handing it back to Harpai. He asked Humāyūn if he should remain in the water-house (*ābdārkhānā*) or the ewery (*āftābkhānā*). The emperor asked him to continue in the latter but instructed him to keep a china cup, a jug with a lid and the water bottle in his own possession. He also instructed Āftābchī to not allow any other person to offer him drinking water without his seal being affixed. The bottle had to be kept filled at nights. He especially asked to be served in the china cup. Āftābchī was also entrusted with the bottle when the emperor was on the march.

Such elaborate instructions around the water and the bottle tell us about the role of material objects in the making of the master-servant relationship. Care and loyalty were expected and expressed through the deft handling of these objects. The drinking water in Mughal polity was also politically an important object as it could be a potent medium for administering poison. A mistake in proper handling would question the

<sup>54</sup> The Persian text spells the name of the *ābdār* as Barpai and Harpai while Stewart writes it as Herby.

sincerity and loyalty, as it happened the next morning. Harpai, having returned, asked Āftābchī to give him the bottle, which he did and forgot the emperor's instruction. When the emperor saw the bottle in Harpai's hands, he gave Āftābchī two blows on the side of the head out of anger and said, 'Whenever, I again assign you a service (*khidmat*), beware not to resign it to anybody.' Āftābchī concluded this episode by saying that erring is common to mankind and that he was grateful for the emperor's forgiveness.<sup>55</sup>

In this passage, Jawhar's narrative was in line with the norms and rules of etiquette followed at the royal court. The appointment was not negotiated; rather it was the emperor who exercised his authority in a hierarchical relationship in assigning tasks to his close associates and attendants. Here, Āftābchī constructed the self of a servant in terms of trustworthiness and confidentiality. He erred, and through his own erring, he also constructed the master's self by praising his ability to forgive. The codes of the ideal template were both constructed and fulfilled in this representation.

In certain passages, Āftābchī brought himself into the narrative with a view to project his loyalty by showing the way he took care of his master's comforts. On one occasion, when Humāyūn's bottle was empty, he asked the 'humble' Jawhar Āftābchī if he had any water in the ewer. Āftābchī replied in the affirmative. The emperor asked him to pour the water into the bottle. He mentioned that although the water was meant for purification, he poured it into the bottle. It was very difficult to procure water in such a 'horrible place'. As they were travelling at night, Āftābchī thought he would die (if he got separated with his master) of thirst. Therefore, he poured a small quantity of the water back into the ewer. The emperor approved this act and said that it would be sufficient for him.<sup>56</sup> The water was for the master's consumption but Āftābchī requested the emperor to allow him to keep a little for himself. Once again, depiction of his sacrificial care and the master's magnanimity went hand in hand. And, at the same time, the deepening nature of proximity is being established, which would make the relationship, as depicted in following passages in the text, appear more

<sup>55</sup> Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī 'āt*, 201–02; Stewart, *The Tezkereh*, 111–12.

<sup>56</sup> Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī 'āt*, 71–72; Stewart, *The Tezkereh*, 35.

dynamic than idealised one-dimensional. In this dynamic relationship, a servant could also make claims and demands.

When the royal entourage had encamped near a small lake, Jawhar Āftābchī, the *miskīn* (humble; poor), was standing near the water body when a deer came out of the jungle and ran through the camp. Many people tried to get hold of it but without success before the deer entered the lake. When the emperor was informed about it, he mounted his horse to pursue the animal and exclaimed that the deer would be delicious prize afterwards. Āftābchī, who was standing by the lake, was told to signal the person standing on the other side of the lake to drive the animal back again. When the deer started swimming back, Āftābchī ran into the water and lay hold of it, asking the emperor for one leg (*rān*) of the deer as his award. The emperor agreed. When the animal was brought out of water, Humāyūn ordered what Āftābchī had demanded (or requested), together with instructing that two quarters would go to the royal kitchen and the rest to the female apartments.<sup>57</sup>

One morning, the humble Jawhar Āftābchī woke up the emperor for prayer. The emperor remarked, 'My boy (ghulām), how can I purify myself with cold water when I am severely wounded?' Jawhar (the ghulām) informed the emperor that he had brought warm water. After performing his ablutions and prayers, Humāyūn mounted his horse and had not gone far away when he complained that the clotted blood on his cloth hurt him. He asked one Bahadur Khan to bring another dress. Bahadur Khan replied that he had a dress but it was the one which the emperor had discarded and given to him. He had already worn it. The emperor insisted on bringing it to him. He changed into it and gave the stained dress to Āftābchī. He asked him to take good care of this dress and wear it on special occasions.<sup>58</sup>

The gift of the dress shows the emotional bonds that a servant had with the master. The dress was a symbol of honour which enhanced the prestige and status of the recipient. Through this, Āftābchī alluded to the ceremony of *khil'at* (in Arabic) and *sar-wa-pā* (from head to foot; in Persian), which, in its political and cultural meanings, translated into robe of honour and a symbol of office. Garment-giving as a ceremony, binding the donor and

<sup>57</sup> Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī 'āt*, 72–73; Stewart, *The Tezkereh*, 35–36.

<sup>58</sup> Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī 'āt*, 170–71; Stewart, *The Tezkereh*, 96–97.

the recipient, was practised in other cultures also. It established a personal link from the hand of the giver (ruler, caliph, head of sect, ambassador) to the receiver (noble, general, official, disciple or servant). Thus, *khil'at* was a symbol of continuity or succession, and that continuity rested on a physical basis, depending on the contact of the body of the recipient with the body of the donor through the medium of clothing.<sup>59</sup>

There is a gradual progression of Āftābchī's loyalty in the text and hence of his upward movement in the social hierarchy. The personal loyalty foregrounded his entitlement for an official post. He had joined the imperial court as an ewer-bearer. Thereafter, he became the *ābdār*. Finally, when Humāyūn regained his lost empire, Āftābchī was appointed as the revenue collector of the *parganah* of Haibatpur. Āftābchī recalled Humāyūn's advice not to oppress the people. Āftābchī, in his moment of humility, accepted that he was unfit for the appointment but he had the trust that after all these years of service and favour which he had received from the emperor, he would not discredit the appointment.<sup>60</sup>

The auto/biographical account shows different sets of codes for the master–servant relationship as observed in the *akhlāqī* texts. The master obviously exercised absolute authority in negotiating the terms of service. However, if we look at these texts from the perspective of repetition, memory and communication, we can notice the dynamics of the self-construction and self-representation. Āftābchī was asked to record his memoir to reconstruct the history of Humāyūn's life and times, but while doing so he also brought his own self into the writing. The relationship which he portrayed was of sacred and spiritual attachment. But these were mediated through material objects—water, deer and robe. The objects of everyday life that tied masters and servants also constituted the boundaries of loyalty and betrayal. The lexical register is also important to note. He used various terms for himself—*miskīn*, *banda*, *khādim* and *ghulām*.<sup>61</sup> Even in the third person, he prefixed

<sup>59</sup> Stewart Gordon, 'Robes of Honour: A "Transactional" Kingly Ceremony', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 225–42. See also Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Āftābchī, *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī 'āt*, 204; Stewart, *The Tezkereh*, 112.

<sup>61</sup> Āftābchī also uses the terms *naukar* and *chākar* without specifying whether they were domestic servants or not.

these words to his name. The relationship of subordination was inscribed in the name itself and, as it appears, internalised. This subordination, however, did not dissolve his identity. He claimed for a leg of deer and finally through his service became a subordinate state official. While Tusi remarked that servants and slaves needed to be assigned tasks according to their intellect and inclination and not shifted or moved, in the realm of reality this was hardly the case. Or at least, as this account shows, personal service was a way to move up in the social hierarchy.

## CONCLUSION

The study of the three texts illustrates that contemporary writings and works have mentioned domestic service under the broader category of *khidmat*, with a reference to wages, labour and interpersonal relationship. It also shows that the problem in recovering or writing the history of domestic service/servitude in Mughal South Asia is not that of the archive per se, but related to the way the analytical categories have been defined under broad historiographical trends. The formulation of research questions influences our approaches to the archive. This intertextual study of the variety of sources—ethical, legal and auto/biographical—on the theme of domestic service reveals different aspects of the master–servant relationship.

The ethical text, namely Tusi's *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, mentioned domestic service as a form of interpersonal relationship which contributed to the efficient management and stability of the household. It focused on the construction of an ideal master–servant relationship by foregrounding the moral dispositions (virtues and vices) to describe the various 'types' of servants and 'masters'. In this construction, the text described emotional bond (love instead of hope or fear, contract and remuneration) between the master and the servant as the basis of this relationship. However, Tusi also used the term *istikhdām* which implied seeking service from someone else, and hence one is tempted to surmise that *akhlāqī* text conceptualised domestic service as a contractual relationship, based on the notions of patronage and loyalty. Tusi also dealt with the legal status of the servant(s) with reference to the question of reliability, trust and dependence. Social distinction such as caste or religion did not determine occupational or

social hierarchy. Legal status and ethnic/regional identities, however, influenced the perception of servants.

The *Al-Fatāwā al-Hindiyya*, a legal text, conceptualised domestic service as a form of contract and job agreement. This text confirmed that although the master–servant (*mustājir and ajīr*) relationship was hierarchical in nature, the servant could negotiate the terms and conditions of the contract. The juristic rulings described this service as a two-dimensional relationship. This text helps us in conceptualising four broad categories in which the meaning of domestic service was embedded: domestic, market, the members of the household and household works.

Tusi's *Akhlāq-i Nāṣiri* identified class hierarchy, legal status and ethnic as well as regional identities as markers of social identity, while the legal text focused on gender, religion and age in addition to the legal status and position of the servants. Āftābchī's *Tadhkirah al-Wāqī'āt*, an auto/biographical account, presented domestic service along the same line as that prescribed as ideal norms, codes and etiquettes of the courtly cultures. Like the ethical texts, Āftābchī's account laid emphasis on loyalty and patronage. The text showed the emotional and affective dimension of the master–servant relationship. Unlike the legal and ethical texts, which have normative overtones and were prescriptive in nature, the auto/biographical account described specific and contingent contexts in which both the master and servants negotiated or navigated across and within the norms and codes of behaviour.

For the early modern period, we would hardly find detailed court cases, depositions, case summaries and other such accounts where servants could be heard (through translation) in first hand. This chapter emphasises the need for an intertextual study of the broad spectrum of texts from different genres which are available for this period to understand the structure and the relationship that existed between masters and servants. Ethics could also be seen as structurally framing the relationship in the same way as law could and did. Such a methodological approach leads us to a rich archive of normative and descriptive/empirical sources and materials to reconstruct the history of domestic servants. Therefore, I propose to read across genres the texts that were written and read in Mughal South Asia, with a focus on norms and practices, to see how ethics, law and memory interacted to conceptualise domestic service in Mughal South Asia.



## 2 | Securing the *Naukar*

### Caste and 'Domestics' in the Fifteenth-Century Mithila

PANKAJ JHA

#### INTRODUCTION

The ways in which the social elites of the medieval period in India ensured a steady supply of essentially captive 'servants' in their households were based on a variety of historically constituted practices. Historians in recent times have paid some attention to the issue of slave labour and slavery in general.<sup>1</sup> Occasional observations concerning the status and the condition of 'servants' and personal attendants in the imperial and noble households have also been made.<sup>2</sup> With a few exceptions, however, these are: (a) based primarily on Persian materials and European travellers' accounts; and (b) concerned with royal and aristocratic establishments.

This is partly due to medievalists' near-exclusive dependence on Persian sources and their obsessive inclination towards state-centric histories of everything under the sun.<sup>3</sup> However, even when writing about the early

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gavin Hambly, 'Who Were the Chihilgani, the Forty Slaves of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish of Delhi?' *Iran* 10, 1972, 57–62; Peter Jackson, 'The Mamluk Institution in Early Muslim India,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 122, no. 2, 1990, 40–58; Irfan Habib, 'Formation of the Sultanate Ruling Class of the Thirteenth Century,' in *Medieval India I: Researches in the History of India, 1200–1750*, ed. Irfan Habib (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1–21; and Sunil Kumar, 'When Slaves were Nobles: The Shamsi Bandagan in the Early Delhi Sultanate,' *Studies in History* 10, no. 1, 1994, 23–52.

<sup>2</sup> Shireen Moosvi, 'The World of Labour in Mughal India (c.1500–1750),' *International Review of Social History* 56, supplement S19, 245–261.

<sup>3</sup> Those familiar with the modern historiography of thirteenth through to the fifteenth centuries and, to a lesser extent, the Mughal period (mid-sixteenth to mid-



historical and early medieval periods, historians did not often mention servants. This has led many to believe that the Sanskrit and ‘vernacular’ accounts do not offer any substantive account of them. Sometimes this has resulted in an assumption that practices of servitude were introduced in the Subcontinent by immigrant Muslims and had no foundation within Indic cultures. On closer examination, however, these views are revealed to be entirely false.<sup>4</sup>

If the non-Persian and non-European materials did not seem to speak to us about (un)free servitude for the longest time, it was because of the historians’ inability to listen to them carefully. Thus, the challenge for current historians, trying to investigate the issue of domestic servitude, is methodological as much as it is about searching for ‘appropriate sources’ of information. That most elite households exploited the labour of servants

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eighteenth centuries) would know that, at least in the case of north India, almost all narratives tend to be woven around the institution of the state and are very often based on ‘authentic’ and ‘authoritative’ (read court-centric) Persian chronicles. This is in sharp contrast to both the earlier and the subsequent periods, in which the sources used are diverse and the themes dealt with much more varied. Some of the most highly regarded books on this period include Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, revised edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707–1740* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1959); Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds, *The Mughal State* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sunil Kumar, *The Emergence of Delhi Sultanate* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008). Though these books represent very diverse trends in the historians’ craft, it is not incidental that all of these ‘classics’ of medieval Indian history are based primarily, if not exclusively, on Persian sources, mostly court chronicles. As the titles of each of these books indicate, the primary theme is the working and/or institutions of the state.

<sup>4</sup> The regularity with which servants (*bhritya*, *preshya*) and slaves (*dasas* and *dasis*) are mentioned in ancient *dharmashastras* such as *Manava-Dharmashastra* (popularly known as *Manusmṛiti*) and even Vedic ritual compendia (e.g., *Grihyasutras*), as well as the early medieval dramas, is striking. The *Manusmṛiti*, for example, often mentions how the *bhrityas* should be treated on a variety of occasions—marriage, sacrifices, other ritual occasions or while receiving guests—even going to the extent of noting down the terrible consequences for ‘relatives who live off a woman relative’s slave girls’ See *Manava-Dharmashastra*, III: 52. For other references, see *Ibid.*, III: 9, 116, 153; IV: 180, and *passim*. Servants are also found frequently in the plays written by Bhasa, Kalidas, Vishakhadatta and others.

within the domestic establishment is attested to profusely at least from the sixteenth century onwards in Persian and European accounts of the time.<sup>5</sup> However, my chapter focuses chiefly on the centuries before the eighteenth. It draws on Sanskrit and vernacular accounts to raise certain questions about domestic servants, especially about the historical conditions under which the exploitation of their un(der)paid labour was made possible. The theme is discussed primarily with reference to the varna/ caste order, the patriarchal character of almost all power relations and politico-legal underpinnings—each of which has had a long history.

## TERMS

One major methodological problem in researching these issues is the difficulty of finding one's way out of a maze of overlapping terms (Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, etc.) that the sources throw at us when describing servants who were free or partly free or entirely 'unfree'. The most common word for a servant used in north Indian dialects today is the Persian *naukar* (Arabic *nukar*, Mongolian *nököd*). This was probably never used for 'servant' before the sixteenth century. However, its near synonym *chakar* (of uncertain origin) does appear as early as the thirteenth century in Mithila.<sup>6</sup> In the fifteenth century, *chakar* appears in Marwari accounts as well as in a Persian chronicle.<sup>7</sup> In the Persian *ta'rikh* literature, *naukar* seems to have been used as a generic term for an 'honourable' male servant, in the service of someone in authority. His vocation was thought to be fairly respectable and his legal status usually 'free'. *Chakar*, on the other hand,

<sup>5</sup> Moosvi, 'The World of Labour in Mughal India', 250.

<sup>6</sup> *Varnaratnakara of Jyotirishvara-Kavishekhacharya*, eds Suniti Kumar Chatterji and Babua Misra, in *Bibliotheca Indica*, Issue No. 1540 (new series), Work No. 262 (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1940), 69.

<sup>7</sup> For the references in the Marwari chronicles, see Norman P. Ziegler, 'Some Notes on Rajput Loyalties during the Mughal Period', in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. John F. Richards (Madison: University of Wisconsin Madison, 1978). Among Persian chronicles, *chakar* is mentioned in *Waqiat-i Mushtaqi*. See Sunil Kumar, 'Bandagi and Naukari: Studying Transitions in Political Culture and Service under the North Indian Sultanates, Thirteenth–Sixteenth Centuries', in *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India*, ed. Francesca Orisini and Samira Sheikh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99.

came to acquire a slightly different meaning. It seems to have been used for a minion of low social origin who was probably entirely dependent on as well as beholden to their master.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, a maid could also be referred to as a *chakar*. Other related words that are occasionally mentioned in Persian texts from the sixteenth century onwards include *khidmatgar* and *khawas*—both, significantly, referring to ‘personal attendant’.

The Sanskrit words most commonly used for servants did not literally mean ‘servant’: *shudra* was the lowest of the four *varnas*, while *dasa* referred to a slave or unfree person attached to a master. *Bhritya*, the word that is most commonly used for ‘servant’, comes from the root *bhr*, meaning ‘to support or sustain’. Thus, *bhritya* literally meant one who is supported by or dependent on (her/his master). This word also makes an occasional appearance, principally in the *dharmashastras*, the so-called law books. Another near synonym, *chetti*—again invoking a personal attendant—is often found in plays. As we will see, our medieval interlocutors often used these words interchangeably, further complicating the matter for historians trying to excavate the precise taxonomy for the relations of servitude during the Middle Ages. However, what is strikingly common among almost all the terms that referred to workers under the larger umbrella of ‘servant’ is that they meant, literally, a figure attached to her/his master. Thus, in contrast to most of the modern service providers who are described in terms of either the service they provide or their institutional affiliation, the early references to the servants appear to be rooted within the matrix of *personal relationships* between them and their masters.

It appears that the domain of the domestic is no less difficult to define. While the household has been a point of reference from early historical times in India,<sup>9</sup> its spatial, social or ritual contours in the ancient times and the Middle Ages are not always easy to define.<sup>10</sup> While a household did exist in reality as well as conceptually, its boundaries were not demarcated. In noble and royal houses, the personal and private could shade into

<sup>8</sup> Kumar, ‘*Bandagi and Naukari*’, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Jaya Tyagi, *Engendering the Early Household: Brahmanical Precepts in the Early Gṛhyasūtras, Middle of the First Millennium BCE* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Kumkum Roy, *Looking Within, Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time; Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2015).

the public spaces without a distinct marker. It is instructive to note that *Manusmriti*, which is very particular about 'defining' every entity that it mentions, does not provide a definition of the 'family'. However, in the context of the family, the author of the most popular 'code of law' provides a list of people with whom one should never get into an argument; this list includes father, mother, sisters, brother, son, wife, daughter and slaves (*dasavargena*).<sup>11</sup> That the dharmashastra texts always refer to the family or the household of upper varnas and refer to servants and slaves as members of these families is interesting with regard to the way in which they conceive of the family itself.

## CONDITIONS

As noted, right from the early centuries of the Common Era onwards, numerous dharmashastras insisted that the *shudradharma*, that is, the duty of the shudras, was to serve the upper varnas. *Manusmriti*, for example, unambiguously remarks that the only (*ekameva*) permissible occupation for the shudras is service (*shushrusamanasuyaya*) to the other four varnas.<sup>12</sup>

From the fifteenth century through to the seventeenth century, a large corpus of Sanskrit texts that were exclusively devoted to elaborating the rituals for and the duties of the shudras emerged in different parts of north India.<sup>13</sup> It is striking that *Manusmriti* says very little about the shudras and is primarily interested in the duties and rights of the twice born (*dvijas*), chiefly brahmins. The texts on the conduct of the shudras (*shudrachara*), however, were more specific in their prescription of the tasks and rituals that the lowest of the four varnas were expected to perform to earn religious merit and secure salvation. They too were unanimous in the view 'that the dharma of a shudra is obedient service to the twice-born.'<sup>14</sup> This should not be taken to mean that all shudras everywhere served a dvija. Indeed, the very emergence of a large number of shudra castes, especially

<sup>11</sup> *Manava-Dharmashastra*, IV: 180.

<sup>12</sup> *Manava-Dharmashastra*, I: 91.

<sup>13</sup> A recent survey counts at least 49 such texts. See Theodore Benke, 'The *Śūdracārāśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa: A 16th Century Manual of Dharma for Śūdras' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

from the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era, was a result of agrarian expansion and widespread peasantisiation.<sup>15</sup> The dharmashastric injunctions did imply that the ideal occupation for a shudra was to serve a high-born. Thus, even a peasant of a shudra caste might actually be attached under specific conditions of servitude, variable across time and space, to a high-born person.<sup>16</sup>

Kamalakara Bhatta's early seventeenth-century treatise, *Shudrahnika*, prescribing rituals for shudras, says that while performing rites for departed ancestors, a shudra should wish aloud that 'my father, who was the servant [dasa] of so and so, should stay satisfied'.<sup>17</sup> One can barely miss the default presumption here that a shudra's father had to be 'attached' to someone (presumably upper caste) as a dasa. The same presumption appears in a fairly similar context earlier in the sixteenth century, when Krishna Shesha exhorted the shudras to say aloud in course of a ritual that 'I will perform daily *shraddha* for my paternal grandfather, and paternal great-grandfather, of such-and-such gotra, servants of so-and-so, with their wives'.<sup>18</sup>

While these references do index the practice among the 'high-born' of keeping captive minions, it is still difficult to make out what functions these 'shudras/dasas' were expected to perform or what entitlements were applicable to them. For, never did either the prescriptive texts or the descriptive accounts from before the fourteenth century bothered to list that out. This is important in the way we understand the history of domestic servants in pre-modern times, as it could leave the sphere of the domestic servants' workload undefined beyond a generic prescription that their primary job was to serve the three upper varnas. Practically, this meant that there was no limit, either in terms of time or of tasks, that could be assigned to a shudra servant.

A somewhat substantive, if unexpected, source of information on these issues is a treatise on 'how to write letters and frame documents',

<sup>15</sup> R. S. Sharma, *Social Changes in Early Medieval India, circa A.D. 500–1200* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> See the 'Introduction' to this volume for details on this issue.

<sup>17</sup> Kamalakara Bhatta, *Shudrahnika*, ed. Kaushal Panwar (Delhi: Vidyanidhi Prakashan, 2010), 57. All translations of passages from *Shudrahnika* are mine.

<sup>18</sup> Benke, 'The *Sūdrācāraśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa'.

entitled *Likhanavali*.<sup>19</sup> This text, probably first of its kind, was composed in the early fifteenth century by Vidyapati, a poet attached to the court of the chieftains of Mithila in north Bihar.<sup>20</sup> Vidyapati wrote *Likhanavali* following instructions of a ruler called Puraditya Girinarayana of Dronavara in the foothills of Nepal, part of the Mithila cultural zone at the time. The text is organised in four parts. The first three parts carry model letters as ideal examples of how to write to one's seniors, juniors and peers, respectively. In the fourth section entitled *vyavaharalikhanani* (literally, Rules of Conduct), the author provides examples of how to document business transactions. He does so for fictitious, but presumably most frequently occurring, transactions and provides minute details of these transactions, never naming the characters but specifying the terms and conditions.<sup>21</sup>

In order to accommodate as varied a set of examples as possible, he usually provides only one 'exemplary' document for each type of the envisaged transactions. It is remarkable, however, that, of the 31 documents in the fourth section, 6 (document numbers 55 to 60) deal directly with transactions that involve the sale/mortgage, under different conditions, of one or more shudra(s), whereas another (document number 84, the last one) mentions a transaction involving a shudra. Clearly, the author considered such transactions to be relatively frequent and possibly important and/or sensitive enough to merit such extended treatment.

The second document in this section records, in great detail, the sale of the family of a shudra man. This is one of the longest documents in the entire text and it is instructive to take a careful look at it:

Siddhih. In the year two hundred and ninety-nine of the erstwhile King Shri Laxman Sendev in the tradition of the most revered kings, on Friday the fourteenth day of the bright moon in the month of Bhadra, accordingly when written numerically in the sequence of month, fortnight, date and day—Laxman

<sup>19</sup> See Vidyapati, *Likhanavali*, ed. Indrakant Jha (Patna: Indralay Prakashan, 1969).

<sup>20</sup> For details on this text and its possible inspiration from Persian tradition, see Chapter 3 in Pankaj Jha, *A Political History of Literature* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> For the characters he uses the word *amuk*, that is, 'so and so'.

Era 299, Bhadra, bright moon, on 14th, the Friday.<sup>22</sup> Further, in the realm of the most revered, adorned with all due procedures, light of good deeds, King of all the three lords [namely] the lord of horses, the lord of elephants and the lord of men, served by thousands of kings, recipient of the grace of Khoda, lauded by panegyrics, Great Sultan Shah's subordinate, Shri so and so, with all due procedures, Narayana-like for the Kamsa enemies, committed to the devotion of Shiva, a man of character and light of good deeds, in his kingdom of Tirahuta, in the country of Ratnapura, subdivision of Migo and village Mimbra, Shri so and so Datta puts in his money for buying male and female shudras.<sup>23</sup> The recipient of this money, needy Ra-uta Shri so and so sold his slave [*dasam*] of Kevaṭa caste, forty-four years old, dark complexioned, named so and so for Rupees six silver ṭamkas, similarly his wife [i.e. the slave's wife who is] thirty years old and fair complexioned named so and so for four silver ṭamkas, similarly their son—sixteen years old and fair complexioned named so and so for three silver ṭamkas, and similarly their daughter, eight years old, dark complexioned named so and so,<sup>24</sup> to look after the cows and perform other duties<sup>25</sup> for the affluent one [i.e. the purchaser] for the duration of the moon and the sun [i.e. forever]. Hereby sold male and female shudras 4; sale amount 14. For the performance of miscellaneous duties, due from both parties—2 each. *At the residence of the affluent one, these shudras will plough the land, clear the left-overs, fetch water, carry the palanquin and perform all other chores. If ever they flee away, they will be brought back to slavery [dasakarma] with this deed as proof [of legitimate claim over them] even if they are hiding beneath the Royal throne.* Witnesses for the purpose are Devadatta, Yajñadatta, Vishnumitra, etc. and it was written by the Kayastha Shri so and so with permission of both parties. Payment due for writing, equally from both—1 silver ṭamka each. This is also the payment voucher for the sum of 14 silver ṭamkas as sale amount. Money received after due verification [for which] the witnesses are the same as for this deed.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> It would be safe to assume that the dates given in these documents would also be largely imagined by the author, since the documents and the purported transactions themselves are imagined. However, it is striking that the years mentioned in the documents are approximately same as the estimated time period during which *Likhanavali* was composed, that is, c. 1420 CE, considering the fact that the Laxman Era started in the 1119th year of the Common Era.

<sup>23</sup> The compound term is *Shudrashudrikrayanartha*.

<sup>24</sup> No price for the eight-year-old daughter is mentioned. It was probably intended to be assumed that since the price for her father, mother and brother adds up to 13 silver ṭamkas, the price paid for her was 1 silver ṭamka only.

<sup>25</sup> The term is *gotragotranivarakam*.

<sup>26</sup> Vidyapati, *Likhanavali*, 42–43 (emphasis added). All English translations of the cited passages from *Likhanavali* are mine.

It is noteworthy that the document elaborately invokes the reigning rulers, both distant and immediate, along with their respective 'gods', before the actual transaction is described. This extended prefacing of the document as well as its assertion at the end that the sold shudras could not transgress the terms set *even if they are hiding beneath the Royal throne* alerts us to the official and state-sanctioned legitimacy of the transaction. Second, the tasks that might be assigned to the sold shudras are initially listed in remarkable detail only to be left perilously open in the end with the phrase 'and perform all other chores'. Thus, the slaves had to undertake any task assigned to them—whether inside or outside the 'house' of their owner. In fact, though the document states that the dasas will perform the tasks 'at the residence' of their masters, such tasks included regular outdoor work such as cultivating the land, fetching water and carrying palanquins. Significantly, the summary description of the tasks for these 'servants' uses the term *gotragotranivarakam*, literally 'to do work related to the cows and not related to the cows'. Furthermore, one cannot fail to notice the remarkable difference in the price of the male shudra and 'his wife'. It is striking that the author invokes a Muslim ruler Sultan Shah, 'recipient of the grace of Khoda', along with a local ruler, to mark a transaction that is clearly underwritten by varna norms. The reader is unlikely to fail to notice that while the purchaser is described in terms of his economic status (affluent one, the *dhanik*), the 'slave' who is being sold is described in terms of her/his (lack of) social status and in terms of her/his physical attributes and the materiality of her/his labour. Already, in the fifteenth century then, one may note the attempt to at least partially create a standardised typology of dependents by mentioning, for instance, the shades of their skin colour and 'de-humanise' those whose labour was exploited.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I am using the word 'de-humanise' in one of the two senses in which Karl Marx used it to describe the manner in which capitalism de-humanises labour by treating labour merely as an instrumentality and without regard to the fact that unlike other means of production, such as land or capital, labour is not just a material 'thing'. I am aware of the fact that Marx's use is applicable only in the 'modern' context of capital and its exploits. Hence, this disclaimer is to underline the fact that the term 'de-humanise' is meant to convey that the transaction deeds very often tend to refer to the dasas/shudras in terms of their potential for labour and with gross disregard to the fact that they are human beings.



It is interesting, on the other hand, that even in the next document, which records the sale of a shudra, the task specified is 'looking after cattle and doing other chores'.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, the validity of the sale is 'for the duration of the moon and the sun', that is, forever. This is significant when one considers the next document, which records a mortgage deed.

Another document records the mortgaging of a shudra by his owner for money, pointing to another practice that might have been common. After the usual flowery details about the ruler (adorned with all due procedures), and noting the time and place, the document continues:

Ṭhakkura Shri Devadatta puts in his money into acquiring a mortgage on all-days basis.<sup>29</sup> The recipient of his money is Ra-uta Shri so and so. So and so has been mortgaged on all-days' arrangement, after giving the guarantee of so and so and receiving four silver ṭamkas in order to pay royal dues. Wherein the mortgaged person on all days' basis, without any clothes or provisions—1; Amount [paid] for mortgage—4 silver ṭamkas. At the affluent one's household, he [the mortgaged man] will carry loads, etc. [usually] carried by the shudras. If he does not do that, then by the [terms of] settlement, he will pay six *kakinies*<sup>30</sup> to the affluent one every day wherein the settlement completed—1.<sup>31</sup>

It may be noted that contrary to the sale deeds mentioned earlier, the terms of the mortgage deed are not as open-ended. Also significant is the fact that his limited entitlements to food and cloth are mentioned. The fact that the deed takes care specifically to mention that the mortgage would be valid on every day of the week is an indication that the mortgage conditions could vary. Indeed, another document (no. 59) in *Likhanavali* itself records a mortgage deed wherein the person concerned was expected to work for four days a week only.

<sup>28</sup> Vidyapati, *Likhanavali*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> The word is *sarvavaravyuḍhibandhakartha* (*sarva* = all; *vara* = day; *vyuḍhi* = arrangement or settlement; *bandhakartha* = for bonded [labour]). The implication of *sarvavara* is probably to specify that the person in question will be required to work for the investor not for specific days of the week/month, but on all occasions.

<sup>30</sup> *Kakini* stood for a quarter of a measure, usually of a *pana* which in turn referred to 80 cowries (shells) or a coin of equivalent value. In everyday usage, *kakini* could also stand for simply a cowrie.

<sup>31</sup> Vidyapati, *Likhanavali*, 45.

Another document recording a similar mortgage deed (of a shudra of kaivarta caste) specifies that ‘as a servant of the patron, he will carry out all the tasks of a servant [dasa].’<sup>32</sup> The language indicates that such mortgaging must have been very common—the deed assumed that the mortgaged person would have to do everything that all mortgaged persons were expected to do.

The last in this series of these documents records the sale of a woman of the shudra caste (a *shudri*). Interestingly, the said shudri is identified as a boatman’s daughter and was sold by a Kayastha (presumably the boatman’s owner). The purchaser is identified as an Upadhyaya (literally, a teacher), and it is specified that the shudri he is purchasing is to be married to another boatman’s son owned by him (the teacher). Clearly, people from all the three higher varnas could ‘own’/purchase/sell a shudra. The use of the term *dasa* (literally, a slave) clearly underlines the low respectability attached to the vocation of servants. It is probably no coincidence that *Varnaratnakara*, a late thirteenth century Maithili text, used the word *chakar* to refer to a household servant in a section devoted to eating/cooking.<sup>33</sup> A *chakar*—unlike *naukar*—was someone who lacked any independent standing or honour.<sup>34</sup>

It is also remarkable that the writer of the deeds was often identified as ‘the Kayastha so and so’, and paid very handsomely. Where an able-bodied adult was ‘sold forever’ for only four to six silver *ṭamkas*, it is amazing that the Kayastha pocketed two full silver *ṭamkas*, one each from both the seller and the purchaser, for simply inscribing the deed. Even if we discount for some exaggeration, this was a lot of money for the work done. It clearly underlines the importance attached to the writing of the document as also the scarcity of the skill required to do so.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>33</sup> *Varnaratnakara*, 69. *Varnaratnakara* is a unique text in the history of vernacular texts of medieval India in as much as it was a compendium of words, phrases, parts of speech and (occasionally) full sentences that might be a ready reference book for writers. The words and other expressions are organised according to themes/occasions that are being described. The word *chakar*, for example, occurs in the context of a meal being served to a householder.

<sup>34</sup> This is the sense in which *chakar* figures in the sixteenth-century Persian *ta’rikh*, *Waqia’t-i Mushtaqi*. See Kumar, ‘Bandagi and Naukari’, 99.

The frequent and interchangeable use of the words shudra and dasa as well as their appearance in the context of a relationship that is clearly based on social bondage might appear confusing to a modern observer and requires explication. A comment by Yajñavalkya almost half a millennia earlier suggested that not all shudras were dasas, as the shudra varna included, among others, cowherds, sharecroppers, servants in the house of upper varna persons, and so on.<sup>35</sup> Krishna Shesha, on the other hand, mentions that ‘by “*dasa*” is meant a servant from birth.’<sup>36</sup> Clearly, the implication here is that people were ‘born into’ the occupation of service to the upper varnas, just as people were born into other professions across the varna order. Repeatedly, in our sources, from the ancient through to the medieval period, it is noteworthy that the terms of reference for the servants always located them within a family and very often as an integral part of that family. However, the sale deeds also point to the fact that this incorporation into the family could be historicised, in terms of at least locating the process of the sale, the writing down of it, the role of ‘witnesses’ and attestations (of humans and gods), and a social sanctity attached to it, as evident from its inviolable nature (the runaways even hiding under the royal throne had to return). The ‘sale’ itself points to a set of other social processes: it could have happened because of distress (famines, etc.), and not least, it could also be a feature of a market, signifying that individuals and families sold themselves off to patrons and patrons too sold their dependents. The sale signified a traffic between family and market, based upon money, written deed and social sanctity.

This is built into the contexts in which they are described but also by the very terminologies in which they are denoted.

## FAMILY AND FREEDOM

Yet, the question of the precise conditions under which the servants worked cannot be reduced to or fully comprehended through an excavation of the terminologies alone. The implied and contingent connotation of the relevant words can be accessed only by looking at the

<sup>35</sup> *Yajñavalkyasmṛiti*, I: 166.

<sup>36</sup> Benke, ‘The *Sūdrācāraśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa’, 207.

historical context of the common and legal practice of what appears to be human trafficking. I examine this context from the limited vantage point of two questions: Were the shudra servants free or unfree? Were they part of the family of their owner, and if so, what rights did they enjoy as members?

The issue of freedom or unfreedom is a tricky one in the context of pre-modern times. Our reference point is the modern age, even as we seek to understand the pre-modern times. The nation-state has emerged in the modern age as the sole arbiter of these questions. Because the modern state enjoys a monopoly over legitimate coercion, and defines a person's free or unfree status with reference to a rule of law, it is easy to delude ourselves that the real unfreedom today exists only in the prisons. With no singular rule of law in the early-/pre-modern times, and multiple institutions exercising overlapping rights to different levels of coercion, it becomes very difficult to decide who enjoyed how much freedom. That is why it is probably more useful to think in terms of a spectrum of freedom and unfreedom rather than passing a summary judgement about the free/unfree status of particular individuals in specific relationships.<sup>37</sup>

The predicament of the shudra dasa was also inflected by their location within not just the household as a 'domestic servant' but also the family of her/his master. Even as the brahman authors of the Sanskrit *dharmashastras* refrained from spelling out the dasa's entitlements, if any, they rarely stopped short of declaring that s/he was an integral part of the family. Again, the author of *Shudracharashiromani* asserted that a shudra

should make ancestral offerings, support his dependents, provide for his wife, serve the upper castes, seek his livelihood from them, use their discarded shoes, umbrellas, clothes, mats, and the like, and eat their leftovers. He may

<sup>37</sup> In the context of a story by Patralekha, Chatterjee noted that 'slavery in the Sanskrit kavya or poetic traditions may have been conceptualized as a dialectic of captivity and transfers along a socially integrated continuum, as a dialectic between alienation and intimacy, not as a static problem of "un-freedom," coerced labor, "commodity," or "property"'. See Indrani Chatterjee, 'Renewed and Connected Histories: Slavery and the Historiography of South Asia', in *Slavery and South Asian History*, eds Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 19.

also support himself by working as an artisan. The Arya whom he serves must also support him, even when he is infirm and unable to work....<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting that the position of the shudra is marked here, even when he is not expressly employed as a servant, as that of someone who must 'seek his livelihood from the upper varnas and eat their leftovers' and so on. As the attempt to 'de-humanise' the shudra resurfaces in this document, we also notice the (ostensibly) opposite in the injunction that his exploiter must 'support him even when he is infirm and unable to work'.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the exploitative power relation between the master and the servant was not based solely on a legal contract but primarily on a *dharmashastra*-driven ethical code. Yet, deeply entrenched social hierarchies of varna-caste regime as well as precepts about the integrity of the family (*kutumba*) created its own tensions in this relationship. On the one hand, this meant that there was no end or limit to the tasks that could be assigned to the servant.<sup>40</sup> It was, among other things, also through articulations of 'affect' and an emotional regime of power that this social hierarchy was to be further secured. On the other hand, this also spelt out a minimal responsibility on the part of the exploiter to 'take care' of the servant even when he was infirm or too old to work or both. It was another matter that such injunctions were never accompanied by any legal/ethical

<sup>38</sup> Benke, 'The *Śūdrācāraśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa', 109. It is to be noted that while the man of the household to which the shudra is attached is encouraged to provide for his servant even if the latter 'is infirm and unable to work', such provision could not be claimed as a matter of right by the shudra.

<sup>39</sup> It makes for an interesting contrast with the modern practice of employing a wage labour. As Nitin Sinha notes in his contribution to this volume, in England in the eighteenth century, for example, 'the "contract of employment" did not mean reciprocal relationship between masters and servants. On the contrary, the nineteenth-century model of master and servant not only brought workers under the penal control but also diluted the master's traditional obligation to care, in which the master was duty-bound to maintain his servant even when the latter was without employment.' Sinha cites two of Simon Deakin's articles in this context (see Chapter 8, n. 9).

<sup>40</sup> Yet, as the chapter in this volume by Sajjad Alam Rizvi notes that, roughly around the same time period (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries), in the ethical (*akhlaqī*) and juridical (*fatawa*) literature in the Persian-Islamic tradition, the tasks of a servant came to be defined a little more precisely. The Sanskrit literary traditions, though overlapping, strike a contrast in this respect.

admonitions about what would happen if a master failed to follow this precept and did not fulfil his ethical obligations.

References in *Shudrahnika* are no less instructive. Though the text was meant to prescribe rituals for shudras only, in several places it also details what a (presumably non-shudra) householder must observe. The context suggests that the author addressed these themes because some of the rituals for a shudra could only be performed by the person he served. Thus, Kamalakara Bhatta describes a ritual to be performed with 'drawn [*udhriten*] water' and goes on to say that the rite should be observed 'on Sundays at home by those with sons' (*putravanakarya saptamya ravivare ca grihe*), adding that it should be done for 'servants, sons and the wife' (*bhrityaputrakalatrartha*).<sup>41</sup> Again, a more direct 'evidence' of the servant ideally being considered a member of the family is provided by Krishna Shesha. Commenting on an injunction from *Manusmṛiti* ('if a Vaishya or a shudra comes to his house, the latter should feed them with the family'), he explains that the 'family means members of the household and/or servants'.<sup>42</sup> One important fall out, obvious but never commented upon, of the insistence that the servant was an integral part of the family was that he could easily be a target of both affective overtures as a placatory force and coercive measures (including physical violence) as a punitive move. For, what happened within family, by tradition though not always by 'law', was held to be nobody else's business other than those in the family. This further confirms the contention, noted above, that insistence on the 'family member status' of the servant worked in contradictory ways for her/him.

It was because of the servant's status as a family member that, irrespective of his caste, he had to follow the 'same purity rules as the master on a birth or death'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, if a brahman was visiting another household along with his family, the servants (of the brahman) had to be fed before the householder could himself eat.<sup>44</sup> Beyond these ritual and somewhat notional claims, it is not easy to make out what concrete or material privileges the *bhritya* (servant) could claim on account of his

<sup>41</sup> Bhatta, *Shudrahnika*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Benke, 'The *Śūdrācāraśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa', 202.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 204. Krishna Shesha seems to have borrowed this precept from *Manava-Dharmashastra*. See *Manava-Dharmashastra*, III: 116.

status as a member of his owner's family. The injunction, cited above, that the servant must be supported by his Arya master 'even if the former is infirm' might have been the only possible, though not mandatory, benefit for them.

It is interesting that a distinct but comparable phenomenon might be located within traditions of military slavery under the Delhi Sultanate. As Sunil Kumar argued long ago, it was grooming of the purchased slaves into, among other things, filial emotions of personal bonding with the owner that paved the way for the *banda* to qualify for service outside the household. It was through the slave's long period of service and slow upward mobility that his owner-sultan developed sufficient confidence in him and entrusted him with greater military/administrative responsibilities.<sup>45</sup>

It might be equally useful, methodologically, to look elsewhere for an understanding of the domestic servant's position within the family. Let us examine a popular legend associated with the fifteenth-century brahman poet from Mithila, Vidyapati. The apocryphal story, probably dateable to the seventeenth century, has it that Lord Shiva was so impressed by, and enamoured of, his devotee Vidyapati that he chose to serve the brahman as a domestic servant or *khawas* after presenting himself to the brahman householder as Ugana.<sup>46</sup> It so happened once that Vidyapati was lost in the forests with only Ugana for company. Feeling thirsty, he asked Ugana to fetch water for him. Finding no source of water anywhere in the forest, Ugana surreptitiously assumed his original form, collected some Ganga-water from his own tresses and reappeared before his brahman master with the same. On tasting this water, Vidyapati immediately recognised it as the water of the holy river and got very suspicious of his servant's identity. When the latter feigned ignorance about the whole matter, Vidyapati

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the significance and history of the dyadic and 'filial' relationship between the slave and the master within the Persianate context, see Kumar, 'When Slaves were Nobles', 42–43.

<sup>46</sup> It is interesting that this Persian word *khawās* was/is most commonly used in Mithila while describing the status of Ugana in Vidyapati's household. It is still a common term in Maithili to refer to a personal attendant. A *khawas* always ritually accompanies the bridegroom when, on the occasion of his marriage, the latter visits the would-be bride's family with his male friends and family members.

threatened to abandon him. Ugana then revealed his real identity but insisted that he would stay as Vidyapati's attendant as long as he did not reveal their secret to anyone else. A little later, Vidyapati found his wife annoyed with their celestial servant. In a fit of anger, she charged towards Ugana, ready to beat him with a piece of wood; Vidyapati had to reveal the real identity of the khawas in order to stop her.

One might be advised to exercise caution while using what is essentially a myth to understand 'realities' of past. Yet myths and legends are meaningful to their creators and consumers only to the extent that they are securely anchored in the perceived truths of their own time.<sup>47</sup> The story of Ugana is instructive at many different levels. The fact that Vidyapati had to reveal the servant's real identity to stop him from being beaten up means that such violence was taken to be within the regular order of things and hence not unusual. At the same time, the tale would evoke wonder among its listeners because of the inversion of the lord-servant relationship. For, one of the more commonly used words for the domestic servant, *dasa*, was also often used by devotees both before and within the bhakti tradition in the Subcontinent. From the famous poet Kalidas through to Raidas and Tulsidas to Keshavdas, numerous historical figures assumed the epithet of *dasa* to signal their single-minded devotion to their celestial lords.

A similar phenomenon might be seen within the Persian-Islamic traditions of the Subcontinent. The Mughal ruler Akbar liked to call his household servants *chelas*, a term yogis commonly used to refer to young disciples.<sup>48</sup> Even as the purchased slaves of Sultanate were called *bandagan* (singular, *banda*), the disciples of the Sufi saints took pride in calling themselves a *banda* of their *pirs* (holy men). Thus, Mirza Nathan described himself as a *murid-i bandagi* (faithful disciple) of Shaikh Farid

<sup>47</sup> As the authors of *Textures of Time* asserted, '...and great historians are open to that dimension of reality that we call "myth", in the sense of being more deeply saturated with meaningfulness and also more creative of the reality that they purport to describe than are other expressive modes'. See V. N. Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004), 94.



al-Din Ganj-i Shakar (d. 1265).<sup>49</sup> These examples might be multiplied. To Amir Khusrau and Hasan Sijzi as much as to Kabirdas and Tulsidas, a declaration of one's ostensibly 'unfree' status as *banda/dasa* carried emancipatory possibilities.

As Daud Ali noted, 'Slave-status terminology, therefore, is often particularly difficult to understand, as it functioned both as a marker of subordination and as a language of distinction.'<sup>50</sup> The semantic shifts and confusions, as noted above, between mystical *dasa/banda* and the domestic servants referred to by the same terms might actually index concrete differences as well as deeper overlap. The wily brahmans might have hoped that their domestic minions would also see the prospects of their salvation in what was essentially their position of bondage within the household. Yet, we should not lose sight of the fact that Sufis devoted to *bandagi* or the *dasas* of the *bhakti* tradition elected their virtual status as unfree whereas the domestic servants and the *ghulams* had no choice.

A letter in *Likhanavali* purportedly written by an upper-caste man to his brother might help us see the other end of the spectrum of possibilities within the relations of servitude:

May it be well. To the most adorable elder brother, a tree-like resting place for affection and care, comparable to father, Thakkura Shri so and so goes this letter from so and so village, by Shri so and so conveying a hundred salutations. By the boundless affection of the respectable brother's feet, all is well here. [I] wish all is well there [too]. Matter is that I cannot disobey the order you gave to free the fettered shudra even though he wishes harm [to me] and even though I had tied him up in great anger and with a purpose,<sup>51</sup> hence he was freed the moment I saw your writing. So, therefore, [kindly] do not renounce the flow of affection towards my ever obedient self.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, the tone of the letter suggests that the use of physical force on, and even forcible incarceration of, a shudra minion was not unusual.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 175.

<sup>50</sup> Daud Ali, 'War, Servitude, and the Imperial Household', in *Slavery & South Asian History*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> *karyatayacabaddhah*

<sup>52</sup> Vidyapati, *Likhanavali*, 6.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Notwithstanding the rather tentative tone of this chapter, one might still make a few points with a fair degree of certainty. First and foremost, the history of servants during the early modern, medieval or, for that matter, during the ancient period in north India cannot be understood without simultaneously writing the history of varna and caste as a mutually reinforcing but dynamic institution of ritual (im)purity, occupational diversity and social hierarchy caught within a criss-crossing network of ethical codes, 'legal' regimes and socially embedded practices. Both the very semantics in which the practices of servitude are described as well as the differential obligations prescribed for different castes indicate beyond doubt that historians cannot begin to understand the servants' pasts without at the same time looking at the regime of varna/caste not just as an enabling one that helped secure a steady supply of servants for the upper varnas but also as the very basis of power that gave the master-servant relations their unique texture.

Second, it is useful to study the institution of family within the Sanskrit literary ecumene beyond the study of *Grihyasutras* and with reference also to the ways in which the ritual structure of the family might have been related to, or reinforced, relations of power within it. For, it was within the family that the worst excesses with regard to servants were to be legitimated. In a related context, it is equally important to understand the emotional/affective regimes within which 'de-humanised' labour was re-humanised and reclaimed. The emotional template of familial ties could help camouflage an essentially exploitative relationship within a discourse that might have been apparently underwritten by the state, as the documents of *Likhanavali* suggested. Yet, there were no reported instances of the state directly intervening in a matter where an absconding or recalcitrant servant had to be chastised or brought back. As the young man writing to his elder brother about the shudra he had put in fetters indicated, as far as the beneficiaries of the varna-sanctioned service regime were concerned, they literally had the law in their own hands. After all, it was a matter that remained within the family. As Sajjad Alam Rizvi's chapter in this volume indicates, this might have started to change, with the state beginning to play a direct role in arbitrating on these matters, as

we move into the power corridors of the Mughal state. Even though some of the sources I examined in this chapter are also from this period, they did not reveal the same level of state's involvement, partly because these sources refer to temporally overlapping but socially non-identical situations, and also because they reflect different ecumenical and literary traditions. This should also alert us to the fact that it is of critical significance to understand the burden of the literary culture that each text carries, before we can begin to mine these sources for relevant facts and ideas.

# 3

## Elite Households and Domestic Servants

Early Modern through Biographical Narratives  
(Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)

SHIVANGINI TANDON

### INTRODUCTION: THE SOURCE, *TAZKIRA*

This chapter analyses the representation of the lives of servants in early modern biographical compendia, known as *tazkiras*, written during sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The pride of place in these narratives is obviously assigned to the life stories of the influential nobles, saints and scholars, but they often make incidental, if still significant, references to the networks of subordinates that sustained their prestige, authority and lavish lifestyles. While the status of the subordinates that I take up for discussion was indeed servile and some among them were slaves of the master, there was still a noticeable investment of affect and emotions in these relations that we often tend to ignore in the anxiety to objectify the slave–master relations. One of the things that comes out from the *tazkiras* is that servility and subjection went hand-in-hand with displays of affection and emotional attachments between the servants and their masters. Perhaps, this was owing to the fact that the elite households were fluid and open-ended and were marked by the incorporation of servants, slaves and concubines into the structure, organisation and meanings of the household. The structure of such an incorporative household was, in turn, a critical element constitutive of the master–servant relations. It is not the intention here to romanticise the master–servant relation. Rather, I attempt to factor in the role of affect in imputing a very specific character to that relation. After all, the fact of subjection is not always incompatible

with the display of affection in the domain of the everyday; they could, and did, inhabit a shared space in our period of study. It is within this context that I will be looking at the roles of servants in the organisation of the aristocratic households in Mughal India.

## A NOTE ON SOURCES

Limited in their perspective due to their focus on the lives of individuals, biographies are often presumed to be of little relevance in exploring the larger forces of historical change. With the decline of teleological history, historians are beginning to realise the need to place human experiences, emotions and subjectivities in the historical narrative. And with it has come the realisation that biographies are not simply individual life stories, but also studies of the incessant interaction of the individual self with the wider socio-cultural forces, in diverse temporal and spatial contexts.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the recent writings on the genre of biographies refer to it as a narrative that is more collective than individual: less about the carefully crafted public self and more about the self-in-society.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is important to recall that *tazkiras* were not simple biographies: these were biographical anthologies, often crafted carefully to trace a spiritual/worldly lineage in retrospect. The acts of omission and commission in the *tazkiras* thus require thoughtful engagement. The Mughal *tazkiras* are an extremely useful, if relatively unexplored, source for understanding Mughal court culture, its norms and values, in active interaction with the relations of power.

<sup>1</sup> It is only in the last couple of decades that historians have begun to see biographies as significant sources for the study of historical experience. The reason for this recent interest in biographical studies, opines David Nasaw, is that 'biographies help the historian to move beyond the strictures of identity politics without having to expand its ever increasing and often useful categories... Moreover, it offers a way of transcending the theoretical divide between empiricist social history and linguistic-turn cultural history without sacrificing the methodological or epistemological gains of either'. David Nasaw, 'Introduction' (to the forum on 'Biography and History'), *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3, 2009, 574.

<sup>2</sup> Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, 'Introduction', in *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia*, eds Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–30.

The word ‘tazkira’ means a ‘memorial’<sup>3</sup> or a ‘memorative communication’. Etymologically, tazkira is derived from an Arabic root, *zikr/dhikr*, meaning ‘to mention, to remember’.<sup>4</sup> The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* defines it as a memorial, memorandum.<sup>5</sup> The early modern *tazkiras* were organised and structured with the objective of constructing, and representing, an Indo-Islamic space in South Asia. In recalling the lives of influential persons, they reconfigured a new discursive space—urbane and cosmopolitan, exclusive and elitist, yet transcendental and sacred. These collective biographies were largely concerned with representing the lives of the elites in a manner that served to reinforce and legitimise their social and political dominance in society. At the same time, operating within a shared normative system, the *tazkiras*, as has been argued by Bulliet, preserved the view from the edge, as it were, incorporating details about lesser human beings, particularly in cases where they reinforced the ideologies of dominance and control.<sup>6</sup>

Arabs were probably the first ones to have initiated the writing of biographies as an adjunct to religious and/or historical sciences.<sup>7</sup> The Persians then developed this tradition, which was later adopted by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. The Ottoman period saw the production of a series of biographies dealing with the poets, under the general title of *Tezkere-i Su’ara*, between the mid-sixteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Some of the *tazkiras*

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Hermansen, ‘Imagining Space and Siting Collective Memory in South Asian Muslim Biographical Literature (Tazkirahs)’, *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 2, 2002, 1–21.

<sup>4</sup> Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (New Delhi: Katha Books, 2004), 64.

<sup>5</sup> W. P. Heinrichs, J. T. P. de Bruijn and J. Stewart Robinson, ‘Tadhkira’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs, 2nd edn, first published online 2012. Available at [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_1140](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1140) (accessed on 31 March 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Bulliet, cited in Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> For details, refer to the works written on Arabic/Islamic historiography, like Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography: Themes in Islamic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> J. Stew Art-Robinson, ‘The Ottoman Biographies of Poets’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24, nos 1/2, 1965, 57–74.

also dealt with the lives of high nobles and aristocrats. One of the things they highlighted was the role of the household in the political advancement of the elites and ruling classes in the empire. In working at the inter-relations between domesticity and power, these Ottoman *tazkiras* represented the state as the extension of the household, and vice-versa.<sup>9</sup> Mughal *tazkiras* too reflect this intricate connect (discussed later in this chapter) between the household and the state wherein the master-servant relationship within the household affected the nature of the state/political relationships.

Of course, incidental references to master-servant relations are found in other genres of writing, in particular, the histories (*tarikhs*), didactic texts on ethics (*akhlaq*), religious texts and poetry. The reason for choosing political *tazkiras* here lies in the details they provide about the organisation of the household, and it is within descriptions of social and cultural activities in the household. Amidst interesting accounts of routine and day-to-day activities in the household, these biographical compendia provide rich details about the presence of the servants (and slaves) within the domain of the domestic.

While the biographical tradition developed in the Islamic world within the sacred realm, and the *tazkiras* largely recorded lives about Sufis and scholars, there did develop in time, particularly in India, a distinctive genre of political *tazkiras*, recording the lives of the rulers and the aristocracy as well. The present chapter focuses on two such political biographies, one written in the seventeenth century and the other in the eighteenth century. My first *tazkira* is Shaikh Farid Bhakkari's *Zakhirat-ul-Khawarin*. Bhakkari was a prominent Mughal noble, and was in personal touch with several of the nobles and saints he discusses in his work. He belonged to a respected family of Bhakkar (Sind). My second *tazkira*, written in the eighteenth century, is Shah Nawaz Khan's *Ma'asir-ul-Umara*. Like Bhakkari before him, Shah Nawaz was also an important noble, and deeply immersed in the Mughal courtly norms and values. These biographies look at the aristocratic households as both political and socio-economic spaces, performing myriad roles, some institutional, others symbolic. Indeed, in

<sup>9</sup> For details, refer to Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

the fulfilment of these roles, the elites in the households crucially depended on the labour of the servants.

## SLAVES AS SERVANTS: TERMS, MEANINGS, CONTEXTS

Once we appreciate the inter-relations between the household and the political process, we realise the difficulty in putting a precise meaning to the term 'domestic service'. The difficulty in marking out the space of 'domestic service' becomes even more serious when we realise that the household was equally a primary unit for a host of economic activities.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, if domestic service is so evasive a term, the category of 'domestic servant' is just as elusive and imprecise in so far as the Mughal period is concerned. This is because within the domestic space, a servant could scarcely be distinguished from slaves, service communities and other servile/subjugated groups. The problem is not specific to Mughal India; we come across similar fluidity/overlaps in early modern Europe as well.

When we look at the question of who constituted 'servants' in early modern Europe, we realise that our answer is necessarily an ambiguous one. During the *Ancien Régime*, there were many kinds of servants, ranging from farmhands to stewards, from maids to ladies-in-waiting, from coachmen to cooks. Servants also differed in their legal status: some were free, others were slaves, and there were yet others who enjoyed only limited freedom. Since serving was not always considered to be a degrading activity in the early modern period, there were servants who also came from the upper strata of the society and chose 'to serve' as their profession.<sup>11</sup>

In Mughal elite households, servants came from a vast range of socio-economic background and were legally defined by varied levels of subjection. Given the huge size of the domestic establishment in Mughal India, there were different kinds of domestic servants in the aristocratic

<sup>10</sup> For details, see Vijaya Ramaswamy, ed., *Women and Work in Pre-Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> For details, see Suzy Pasleau and Isabelle Schopp, with Raffaella Sarti, eds, *Proceedings of the Servant Project*, 5 vols, vol. 2 (Liège: Éditions de l'Université de Liège, 2005 [but 2006]), 3–59.



household, enduring varying forms of servility and subjection. At the lowest rung, the domestic servant was in practice indistinguishable from the slave, even as there were legal specifications in *shari'at* that distinguished a slave from an ordinary servant. Slaves were indeed deployed in large numbers as domestic servants across almost all classes in the pre-Mughal as well as the Mughal periods.<sup>12</sup> The religious *tazkiras*, in particular Shaikh Abdul Haq's *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, refer to slaves performing domestic chores for the saints and Sufis in the Mughal period.<sup>13</sup>

Slavery, as we know, is legally accepted under the Islamic law or *shari'at*. In the Mughal period, transactions in slaves were duly recorded and registered in the court of law. The National Archives of India (New Delhi) has several documents of the sale and purchase of slaves in the Mughal period. These documents refer to slaves as no more than an object of sale (*bai'*) and bear specifications such as the slave's price, age and distinctive marks. Called 'receipts of the sale of a slave' (*chithi barda faroshi*), the documents indicate the appropriation of the body (and the agency) of the slave by the purchaser/master. In one such *chithi*, dated 18 February 1763, we come across an instance of a girl of just four years sold as a slave (*kanizak*), to one Husamuddin, for 1 rupee.<sup>14</sup> In another sale deed (*bainama*), we come across an instance of an elite lady, Sanjida Bano, selling off her slave girl (*kanizak*) called Raushan Afza to one Mulayam Bai for 23 rupees.<sup>15</sup> The documents, in line with the legal-sacral system, or the *shari'at*, convey a picture of complete objectification, a sense of subjection that totally appropriates agency, in so far as the slave is concerned. As a legal document, the sale deeds could not, and did not, provide an entry point into the domain of affect, and hence they do not allow us to explore how, if at all, the slaves could negotiate their agency in practice.

Interestingly, the impression that we get from the Persian legal documents remains unchanged when we look at the Sanskrit documents

<sup>12</sup> See the contributions by Sunil Kumar, Uma Chakravarti and Pankaj Jha in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> For details, refer to Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlawi, *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, translated by Ghulam Muinuddin Naimi (Delhi: Farid Book Depot, n.d.), 226.

<sup>14</sup> NAI 2382/43, National Archives of India (New Delhi), Acquired Documents.

<sup>15</sup> NAI, 2382/49, National Archives of India (New Delhi), Acquired Documents.

of the medieval period, in particular the *Lekhapaddhati* documents dealing with slave transactions.<sup>16</sup> In the *Lekhapaddhati* collection, there are several documents concerning the sale and purchase of female slaves for domestic service. In one such document from Gujarat, a merchant purchased a slave girl for 'five hundred and four *visalapriya drammas*' for performing the following domestic chores: cutting; grinding; smearing the floor; sweeping; bringing firewood; carrying water; throwing away human excreta; milking the cow, buffalo and goat; churning the curd and carrying buttermilk to the field; and field work such as bringing the fodder, weeding and cutting grass.<sup>17</sup> The point to note here is that the female slaves were purchased for domestic service; and in so far as the reasons for their purchase were concerned, they were a category of domestic servant lying, perhaps, at the lowest level of graded domestic service.

In fact, the practice of purchasing female slaves for domestic service was quite well-established during the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, and it remained unchanged during the Mughal period. In another *Lekhapaddhati* document, belonging to late thirteenth century, a lower caste woman sold herself, in return for maintenance, to a merchant, promising to render the following domestic chores: 'cutting, grinding, sweeping, fetching drinking water, smearing the floor with cow dung, throwing away human excreta and all other household duties'. Accepting her abject status as a slave, she also allowed her master to punish and beat her when she failed to comply with her domestic duties: 'If I refuse to perform the duties when I am ordered to do so, you will punish me by kicking and beating me with sticks and torture me with death, for which you, my master, will be as free from guilt, as you would be had you been absent.'<sup>18</sup> What becomes clear from the above excerpts is that the slave was, in the documents of a legal nature, treated as mere chattel, purchased, among other things, for domestic service. In the *insha*' literature of the Mughal period, too, the

<sup>16</sup> The *Lekhapaddhati* is a collection of model documents compiled in the fifteenth century. Besides providing valuable evidence for administrative history, it also sheds light on the various aspects of the social life of the period.

<sup>17</sup> Pushpa Prasad, *Lekhapaddhati: Documents of State and Everyday Life from Ancient and Early Medieval Gujarat* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 158.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 161–62.

slave is similarly presented as bereft of an agency of her/his own, an 'object' in the possession of her/his master.<sup>19</sup>

As historians, we must be cognizant, however, of the overlaps and distinctions between categories through which we write histories. Seen strictly through the optic of transactional value of property as embedded in the act of buying and selling, these men and women appear as slaves. Yet, there were, in these very centuries, other trajectories of social and political alliances open for elite slaves. These ordinary men and women and their deeds of sale also point to the centrality of 'work' in marking their identity. Most of the chores asked of them, or expected from them, fell within the remit of domestic work or such farm works as cutting the grass and weeding that had become gendered. Seeing from the viewpoint of sale and control over body, they were slaves; looking at the remit of the work done, they could also be seen as servants. While a historian is entitled to rue the fact that socially marked out distinct selfhoods of slave or servant are almost impossible to discover in this period, the absence of the distinction might itself be a significant indicator. For, it meant, on the one hand, that the 'legal freedom' of the servant did not really count for much; on the other hand, it also meant that ultimately the everyday agency enjoyed by the slave depended not so much on her/his legal status as on the nature of her/his assigned task and the status associated with that occupational category.

Notwithstanding differences of style and variations in terminology between the different sets of documents in *Lekhapaddhati*, the sense of objectification and subjection remains unchanged.<sup>20</sup> What stands out in these documents is that the female slaves were an integral component of domestic service, though the tasks assigned to them included milking cattle and cutting grass apart from fetching water and fuel, grinding (grains), cooking, cleaning, sweeping, throwing away the excreta of the master's family, and so on. Though difficult to ascertain, it is quite probable that

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Abul Qasim Namkin's *insha* text, called *Munshaat-i-Namkin* (the text has been edited by Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli under the title, *The Mughal State and Culture, 1556–1598: Selected Letters and Documents from Munshaat-i-Namkin* [New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2007]).

<sup>20</sup> Prasad, *Lekhapaddhati*; Pushpa Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate, 1191–1526* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

the primacy of female servants in the domestic domain was related to the possible exploitation of their sexual labour by the patriarchs of the family during this period.<sup>21</sup>

The categories of 'slave' and 'servants' were therefore quite fluid, and in routine day-to-day life they overlapped with each other. We notice a similar situation in early modern Europe where the roles, activities and social status of domestic servants were generally quite ambiguous and diffused, making it difficult for the authors to define the category of 'domestics'; often they divided the servants into various complicated categories. There were those who were called 'servants by nature' and were defined as the 'barbarous and uncouth people'; then there were servants who were called 'servants by law'; and then again there were servants who were the 'slaves'. In addition, there were also those who served not 'for money or out of compulsion, but for mere and sincere pleasure, feeling great affection towards their master's virtue'. The ones in this position were called servants, but they were 'not truly so'; they were rather 'courtiers'.<sup>22</sup>

## MASTER-SERVANT RELATIONSHIPS: BETWEEN HAREM AND SARKAR

The network of relations that upheld the social order in Mughal India was frequently articulated in terms of master-slave relations: both in the Persianate literary ecumene as well as in the vernacular. It is interesting that in the early modern European society too, it was believed that 'all in the world, serve, if they don't live in idleness'.<sup>23</sup> It is owing to this that even in the letters of the time, people signed proclaiming themselves as 'the most humble' or the 'most obedient servant'.<sup>24</sup> In Mughal India, the socio-cultural life was marked by the elaboration of master-servant relations in a wide range of social and intimate spaces. In Indo-Persian

<sup>21</sup> *Lekhapaddhati* documents cover a long period, ranging from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries. For a very persuasive discussion of the critical role of sexual labour of female servants in the patriarchal households during the ancient period as represented in the Pali and Sanskrit literature, see Uma Chakravarti's contribution to this volume.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see Pasleau and Schopp, with Sarti, *Proceedings of the Servant Project*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

poetry, for example, love was often articulated in terms of abject subjection, and the lover presented herself/himself before her/his beloved as her/his slave (*banda*).<sup>25</sup> One could dismiss the evidence in poetic compositions as no more than a flight of imagination, but the corroborating evidence in the *tazkiras* indeed suggests that the master–slave relations were imbued with intense emotional investment in the prevailing social norms. The evidence in the *tazkiras* undermines the picture of objectification and total subjection that we get from the legal documents of the period. There is, instead, evidence of considerable investment of emotions on the slaves in the domestic establishments. In fact, the master–slave relations are imbued with a lot of attachment and even intimacy on both sides. One of the reasons, perhaps, for this lies in the fact that in the prevailing norms of manliness, marked by consumption and connoisseurship,<sup>26</sup> domestic servants and/or slaves were necessary for the maintenance of the norms of civility and deportment. This must have, among other things, facilitated the affect-laden representation of domestic slaves in Mughal biographies. In this section, we will explore the master–servant relationship along three axes: the nature of the connections and linkages between the harem (usually regarded as the private quarters) and the *sarkar* (the state/empire); norms of masculinity; affect and violence.

At this point, it is important to recognise the complex imbrications of the Mughal domestic space or the household with imperial sovereignty. Indeed, in our anxiety to present the state as a ‘centralised-bureaucratic’ structure, we have tended to focus on the formal institutions of rule, and have ignored the strength of informal and intimate relations emerging from the spaces of the household in shaping imperial sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> One

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Hadi Hasan, *Mughal Poetry: Its Cultural and Historical Value* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008, reprint) and Rajiv Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). For a similar argument with reference to the literary culture in the Ottoman and early modern Europe, see Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Rosalind O’Hanlon, ‘Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal India’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 1, 1999, 47–93.

<sup>27</sup> For details, one can look at the works produced by the historians of the ‘Aligarh School’ like Irfan Habib, Athar Ali, Shireen Moosvi and—despite his lack of formal

of the important perspectives about the political process that we gain from these biographical dictionaries is that the household and the state were deeply entwined with each other. In her study of imperial women, Ruby Lal has drawn attention to the significance of domesticity as a political space, and has brought to light the extent to which the harem and the court constituted each other.<sup>28</sup> Since her work was centred on the agency of imperial women, she expectedly failed to examine the agency of the slaves and servants in the household in shaping the political processes. The affect-laden relations in the intimate household/familial spaces were often articulated in the language of master–servant relations. In a path-breaking work, Munis D. Faruqui has drawn our attention to the political significance of the princely households in the expansion and consolidation of the Mughal state, arguing that the conflicts among the princes served to strengthen, rather than weaken, the state.<sup>29</sup>

In further pursuing this shift in Mughal historiography, the evidence in our *tazkiras* is indeed quite significant; we get elaborate and detailed descriptions of princely households, which provide fresh perspectives about state–household relations in the Mughal period. More importantly, these biographical works provide a lot of interesting details about the aristocratic households as well; their thick descriptions about the households of the nobles and the elites reveal their political significance, and their imbrications with the princely households and the state. Given the concerns of this

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attachment to Aligarh—Tapan Raychaudhuri. They viewed the Mughal State as a ‘centralized–bureaucratic formation’ and evaluated it purely on the basis of revenue, military, fiscal, trade and the monetary system. Therefore, they saw the Mughal State as a rigid structure rather than in terms of a constantly changing and evolving process. See M. Athar Ali, ‘Towards an Interpretation of the Mughal Empire’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1, 1978, 38–49; Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707*, second revised edn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire, c.1595: A Statistical Study* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For an excellent study on the importance of gender and household among the Anglo-Indian communities in colonial India, see Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> For details, see Munis D. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

chapter, the emphasis on household as a political force draws attention to the master–servant relations, and the diffusion of these relations in structuring other relations in the household and the political spaces as well.<sup>30</sup>

In the early Mughal period, the domestic space was quite tenuous, and was constantly intruded by the ‘external’ forces. For instance, in *Baburnama*, Babur recollects the domestic space as no more than a shifting camp, with his relations, nobles, wives, concubines, slaves and servants perpetually on the move. There were no regular taxes to realise, no permanent administrative staff and no bureaucratic structures worth the name. However, even as the court was peripatetic, the imperial household was marked by strong, intimate relations; tied to the political process, these relations were crucial to state formation. Abul Fazl talks about a large population of domestic servants on whom the functioning of the imperial structure rested: he refers to these servants as the *khawas* (personal attendants), *qurchi* (house-guards), *sharbatdars* (drink-servers), *abdars* (water-men), *toshakis* (keepers of the wardrobe), etc.<sup>31</sup>

The personal establishment of the emperor included the large harem. Challenging the ‘Orientalist’ depiction of the Mughal harem as a site of *eros*, Ruby Lal’s work reveals the disciplinary processes at work in these spaces, and the centrality of a controlled, disciplined body to the enunciation of legitimate rule.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, her work demonstrates how the household was a political process, and in doing so, reveals the impressive agency available to the women in the harem.<sup>33</sup> Women servants were assigned various duties in the harem for which they received monthly salaries. Some of them worked as guards of palaces and some as supervisors (*darogha*) over other maidservants. Even when the imperial camp was on the move, separate enclosures were provided in the encampment for

<sup>30</sup> For studies on family and household relations in South Asia, see Indrani Chatterjee, ed., *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, ed. H. Blochmann, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1867–77), 4–5.

<sup>32</sup> For details, see Lal, *Domesticity and Power*. Moreover, an important work that looks into bodily deportments and corporeal practices under the Mughals, and their relations with imperial sovereignty, is A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship & Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Lal, *Domesticity and Power*.

the female servants and slaves (*khasan*) of the emperor, besides those of the wives and other relations. The female guards (*urdu-begis*) and other 'pious' women servants (*zanan-i parsā*) were also allotted separate cells. These women servants appear to belong to a lower category than the concubines.<sup>34</sup> Coming to the 'external' (*birun*) part of the imperial palace establishment, its personnel included numerous male servants of all kinds. In the encampment department alone there were tent-pitchers, carpet-setters (*farrash*), spade-wielders (*beldar*), water-carriers (*saqqa*), carpenters (*durodgar*), leather-workers (*charamdoz*), tent-repairers (*khaimadoz*), sweepers, etc. The lowest in status of all servants were the sweepers (*khak-rub*, *jarub-kash*, *kannas*), who belonged to the so-called menial castes.<sup>35</sup>

From the above description, it becomes amply clear that the Mughal imperial court and imperial harem were dependent on the services provided by these marginalised groups. It is primarily owing to this that their lives find a mention in the *tazkiras*. Services of some of these groups, in fact, get a detailed treatment in these biographical narratives. They were remembered in the *tazkiras* for their loyalty, steadfastness and service towards their masters and the empire in general. In addition to the mention of nobles being granted high ranks, the *tazkiras* are replete with detailed descriptions of the slaves and eunuchs who were appointed in the service of the Mughal kings and nobles, ensuring the memorialisation of their lifelong service and personal sacrifice for their masters.

References to the devotion of the slaves and the significance of the master-slave bond leading to the elevation of some of the slaves to higher positions in the political dispensation are also found. For instance, Baqi Khan Chela Qalmaq was Shah Jahan's slave (*chela*)<sup>36</sup> who was, in appreciation of his loyalty, made an imperial *mansabdar*, and was eventually made the *faujdar* of Catra.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, there is mention of

<sup>34</sup> For details refer to *Ain*, 1: 40–41, and Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, *Zakhirat ul Khawanin* (completed 1650), ed. Syed Moinul Haq, vol. 2 (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1970), 110.

<sup>35</sup> For details, refer to Bhakkari, *Zakhirat ul Khawanin*, 2: 97.

<sup>36</sup> The *tazkiras* repeatedly use the word *chelas* for the slaves. See, for example, Shah Nawaz Khan, *Ma'asir-ul-Umara*, eds Maulawi Mirza Ashraf Ali and Maulawi Abd-ur-Rahim, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1888–91), 623.

<sup>37</sup> Shah Nawaz, *Ma'asir*, 1: 380–81.



one I'timad Khan Gujarati, a Hindu slave of Sultan Mahmud (the ruler of Gujarat). Shah Nawaz states that 'as the sultan had full confidence in him, he appointed him in his harem and assigned to him the adorning of women'.<sup>38</sup> Then there is mention of Firuz Khan, the eunuch who was one of the trusted servants of Jahangir, and was awarded with a high rank of 3,000 *zat* and 1,500 *sawars*. *Ma'asir* states that 'he had charge of the palace, and he was respected and honored in Shah Jahan's service'. He even built a garden on the banks of the Jhelum.<sup>39</sup>

Even lower caste servants and menial groups are represented in our *tazkiras* as moving up the social ladder. Interestingly, there is some evidence of a few among them ending up as high-ranked bureaucrats and petty nobles in their own right. A significant case is that of Mihtar Khan *khassa-khail*, a simple gatekeeper of the harem during Humayun's time and a 'buffoon' (as described by Bhakkari). He neither had the sophistication nor the 'high culture' that was the prerequisite for becoming a *Mirza*, yet he is praised by Bhakkari for his manliness and bravery.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, there is mention of Miyan Gada Kalal, a wine-seller. While referring to him, Bhakkari says that 'he had earned a good name in respectability and worthiness'.<sup>41</sup>

The selective incorporation of the 'peripheral groups' in the *tazkiras* serves a twofold purpose. First, it provides a voice/agency to the otherwise marginalised groups. Second, it helps us understand the patterns of court patronage, mobility and their level of engagement with the elite values. The evidence of lowly servants rising to high positions in imperial service is interesting, and reveals the agency of servants (and slaves) in negotiating household-state relations in the Mughal period. This is largely an unexplored area, but we need to recognise the role of servants in aristocratic households in shaping the political processes during our period of study.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 93–100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 564–65.

<sup>40</sup> Bhakkari, *Zakhirat*, 1: 223.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>42</sup> For the role of slaves and servants in the political system in the Sultanate period, see Sunil Kumar, 'Service, Status and Military Slavery in the Delhi Sultanate of the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries', in *Slavery & South Asian History*, ed.

It has been argued by Stephen P. Blake that the Mughal Empire was a 'patrimonial-bureaucratic state'. Drawing upon Max Weber, he argues that the Mughal Empire was neither a purely bureaucratic state nor a purely patrimonial one; it was actually a mix of both. Within his formulation of the empire then, the state was in certain crucial respects a household, writ large, an extended imperial household.<sup>43</sup> Influenced by Blake, historians like Rosalind O'Hanlon have argued that there was a household-state compact of authority that constituted an important aspect of the state formation in Mughal India.<sup>44</sup> One of the important results of the household-state continuum was that the emperor's body could be represented as the location of sovereignty and the emperor himself was seen as a patriarch with the kingdom as his personal household.<sup>45</sup> This state-household compact, in the late seventeenth century, gave rise to a novel sense of manliness that involved maintenance of gentlemanly prestige, elite hospitality and shared attractions of personal refinement which drew like-minded men to one another.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the correlations between

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Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 83–114; and Sunil Kumar, 'Bandagi and Naukari: Studying Transitions in Political Culture under the North Indian Sultanates, 13th–16th Centuries', in *After Timur Left: Cultures and Circulation in Fifteenth Century North India*, eds Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60–108.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen P. Blake, 'The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals', *Journal of Asian Studies* 29, 1979, 278–303.

<sup>44</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Kingdom, Household and Body History: Gender and Imperial Service under Akbar', *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 5, 2007, 889–923. Note, however, that O'Hanlon inflects Blake's argument and contends that 'the image of fatherhood and household government was central to the articulation of Akbar's sovereignty, but in ways that carried a wider significance than is suggested in Stephen Blake's account of the patrimonial dimensions to Mughal imperial authority'. See Hanlon, 'Kingdom, Household and Body History', 900.

<sup>45</sup> Blake postulated that the Mughal State was somewhere between a pre-modern state (patrimonial, according to Weber) and a modern state (bureaucratic), and hence it can be termed as a 'patrimonial-bureaucratic state'. The ruler of such a state governs on the basis of a personal, traditional authority whose model is the patriarchal family. The empire is conceived as a huge household, over which the emperor tries to exercise power in an absolute and unrestrained way. See Blake, 'The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals'.

<sup>46</sup> O'Hanlon, 'Manliness and Imperial Service', 68.

manliness and imperial service led to the development of the notion of *khanazadgi*,<sup>47</sup> or devoted, familial, hereditary service to the emperor in a privileged social position, one that linked the servant to a position of respectability and honour.<sup>48</sup> A *khanazad* was a hereditary servant, and yet his position of *khanazadgi* was one of immense prestige and honour.

In the political *tazkiras*, the aristocratic households are described by two sets of terms: harem and sarkar. The sarkar relates to the vast establishment controlled by the noble, whereas, hidden from the public gaze, harem refers to the secluded quarters inhabited by women (as also servants and close affines). The distinctions between them cannot be stretched beyond a point, and in actual practice, both the sarkar and the harem were hardly distinguishable from each other. If the harem was a 'private' familial space of affect and emotions, it was also a political space; familial affect and relations served to cultivate and maintain durable political relations. Similarly, if the sarkar was a space for the circulation of resources, the distribution of these resources and the differential access to them were matters that were determined by relations of affect and emotions.

The important point is that our *tazkiras* represent the aristocratic households as replicas of the imperial or the princely establishments, with their independent financial administration, a motley of attendants, and separate apartments for wives and concubines, who were constantly served by a team of slaves and eunuchs, several 'external' apartments, kitchens, courtyards, etc. For instance, the task of preparing the menu, laying out the dining carpet and supervising the serving of food fell upon a servant called *sufrachi* (one who laid the table). Other important servants in the kitchen were the *bakawal* who obtained the materials for the kitchen, and the *chashnigir* (taster) who first tasted the food before it was served. Each aristocratic household maintained a separate department for providing water (*abdarkhana*) and a *suchi khana* (cellar). The farrash was employed

<sup>47</sup> This term is derived from the word '*khanazad*' which literally means 'son of the house' and is commonly translated as an offspring of a slave. J. F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 255–89.

<sup>48</sup> Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers'.

to spread carpets and (during marches) for pitching tents, *mashalchis* (torch-bearers) for carrying lamps and candles, and *mahauts* for looking after elephants, etc. Other servants were also maintained for display: one servant for marching on the side of the palanquin, holding a spittoon; two more to fan the master and to drive away the flies; four footmen to march in front to clear the way; a number of decorated horsemen; and a *kafshbardar* to keep or carry shoes.<sup>49</sup>

The imperial, princely and aristocratic households required the services of a large number of specialist groups, in particular the scribes, for the efficient management of their households. The scribal communities expanded in number with the consolidation of the Mughal rule. They claimed such a substantial share in the resources of the Mughal State that the eighteenth century has sometimes been called the century of the scribe in South Asian history.<sup>50</sup> Our *tazkiras* include biographical sketches of the scribes (*munshis*) as well, highlighting their immense role in the shaping of the empire, and the management of the imperial and aristocratic establishments. They are commended for their skills in book-keeping, correspondence (*insha'*), accountancy (*siyaq*), auditing, etc. The information that we get from the *tazkiras* reinforces the growing emphasis in Mughal historiography on the significance of the north Indian scribal communities in the systematisation of the empire.<sup>51</sup> Bhakkari's *Zakhirat* mentions one Jalal Khan Kakar, who was an unrivalled letter-writer (*munshi*), a good poet and a prose writer. During the reign of Jahangir,

<sup>49</sup> Bhakkari, *Zakhirat*, 2: 143.

<sup>50</sup> For details, see Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 169–74, and Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India: c. 1200–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> See Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Kinra, *Writing Self*. Also see Rajiv Kinra, 'Master and Munshi: A Brahman Secretary's Guide to Mughal Governance', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 47, no. 4, 2010, 527–61; Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'The Social Worth of Scribes: Brahmans, Kayasthas and the Social Order in Early Modern India', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 47, no. 4, 2010, 563–95; and Sumit Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian to Preserve the Dharma: The Ideology and Training of a Clerical Elite in Peninsular India, c. 1300–1800', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 47, no. 4, 2010, 497–525.

he was appointed to the Deccan. While at Hoshangabad *thana*, he was involved in suppressing the Gond<sup>52</sup> rebellion; his courage and bravery became subjects of popular memory, and are recollected in Bhakkari's *tazkira*.<sup>53</sup> These *munshis* or clerks could rise to high positions in the Mughal court both due to diligence in their work as *munshis* and also on account, at least sometimes, of their bravery. For instance, Bhakkari mentions one Khwaja 'Abdu'l-Majid Asaf Khan who was wounded fighting the rebels during Akbar's time and so was given the post of *vakil* in the Mughal court.<sup>54</sup>

One must, however, point out that all servants of the state were not equally privileged and/or exploited. *Munshis* might also have been referred to as servants of the state, but the nature of their work, both in the Persianate tradition as well as in the Sanskrit tradition, carried a strong sense of status and privilege. This obviously was not the case with such 'menial' servants as the washermen, gardeners or sweepers.

During the late seventeenth century in Mughal India, the norms of masculinity constituted an important criterion for entry into certain privileged circuits. These were articulated within the spaces of the household by the maintenance of gentlemanly prestige, elite hospitality, shared attractions for personal refinement which drew like-minded men to one another, and intense concern to establish spatial and physical boundaries with the culture of servants, menials and the bazaar.<sup>55</sup> The concern for proper deportment lay behind the huge number of charitable activities that are described in great details by our *tazkiras*. It also informed the patronage that the aristocratic households provided for cultural activities; indeed, they spent a large part of their resources in patronising poets, musicians, dancers, etc. In the detailed descriptions that the *tazkiras* provide about the cultural activities that were undertaken in the households of the nobles and aristocrats, they are actually seeking

<sup>52</sup> Gonds were 'tribal' communities who were sometimes involved in conflicts with the Mughals over redistribution of forest resources. Therefore, Mughals had to deploy efficient administrators and military personnel to prevent the Gonds from causing political and economic instability.

<sup>53</sup> Bhakkari, *Zakhirat*, 2: 336.

<sup>54</sup> Bhakkari, *Zakhirat*, 1: 123.

<sup>55</sup> O'Hanlon, 'Manliness and Imperial Service', 68.

to represent these households as modest imitations of the imperial court, carrying the concerns of the court forward into the localities. In the 'expansive household' model therefore, services were sought from various groups, and ties of patronage and dependency were not limited to slaves and servants working within the household but were also extended to the musicians (*kalawants*), courtesans, hawkers, etc. Their services were solicited in household feasts and festivities, and their presence was crucial to lend civility and grace to aristocratic households. The very fact that these peripheral groups of entertainers (courtesans, musicians, etc.) are remembered in the *tazkiras* for their literary and aesthetic skills, in a way reflects that they were re-enforcing the elite norms and values of refinement, even as they were modifying/contesting them as well. The servant class was, in the aristocratic households, a diffused class, and included members of the service communities as well.

While we cannot ignore the elements of violence and exploitation that marked the master–slave relations in the elite Mughal households, it does appear from these elite biographical dictionaries that the element of force was often overlaid with strong patron–client bonds. Just as much as the aristocratic households were extractive units, they were redistributive in equal measure. Charity was a regular feature of the management of these households, and resource dispensation went hand in hand with the appropriation of resources and labour in these households. It created enduring relations between the elites and the marginalised groups.

The Mughals preferred individualised forms of charity over institutionalised ones. Many of these charities, in the form of gift-exchanges, established hierarchical relations between the elites, on the one hand, and the servants and slaves of the household, on the other. Bhakkari informs us that Murtaza Khan Shaikh Farid Bukhari routinely distributed tunics, blankets, sheets and slippers when he rode to the royal court. He is also reported to have given away cash stipends to the *ulema*, *mashaikh* and other needy persons.<sup>56</sup> In fact, another noble, Mir Abul Qasim Arghun in Sindh used to cover forest trees with cloth and release herds of cows, buffaloes and horses, to be freely taken for their use by common people.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Bhakkari, *Zakhirat*, 1: 138–40.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Ram Das Kachhwaha would give away a lot of money to the community of *charans*, bards and courtesans every year.<sup>58</sup>

Some nobles were very particular in giving gifts to the people of their villages and townships (*qasbas*). Rai Govardhan, a high official in Itimad-ud-Daula's establishment and the person in charge of managing the sarkar of Nur Jahan Begum, built a new fortified township at his village home Khari, and in the village, he constructed *pucca* houses for the villagers. He constructed roads for the market and for the *chowk*. He also made endowments for the welfare of the residents of his village, including artisans and peasants. He gathered 3,000 to 4,000 oxen, buffaloes, cows, goats, sheep, mares and camels, and let them loose on the banks of the Ganges for free use by the people of his village. Nawab Wazir Khan Alimuddin, who was *wakil* of Shah Jahan, built a city with a market, *sarai*, mosque, *madrasa* and a dispensary, and handed it over to its residents.<sup>59</sup> Charity was not specific to one's servants and slaves, but also extended to the lower classes as a whole. It is interesting that the relations of subjection were frequently represented within the discursive thrust of charity and grace on the part of the master on the one hand, and obedience and gratitude on the part of the servants. The discourse of grace might be said to have represented the entire state and society together in a singular conceptual bind. After all, grace radiated, first and foremost, from the emperor towards all his subjects. But the same relation could be replicated, as a normative construct, in all relations between the master and servant at every level. Yet, in the lived world, not all relations of power were equivalent or even comparable.

## CONCLUSIONS

One could argue that the elites in the Mughal court, by sharing the imperial spaces with the subjected groups, were involved in a process of 'localization of sovereignty'.<sup>60</sup> In certain exceptional cases, these *tazkiras* provide

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 203–04.

<sup>60</sup> Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c.1572–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129.

biographical sketches of lower class individuals who had apparently crossed the social divide that separated the elites from the plebian elements. I have looked at the ways through which the ordinary people figure in the *tazkira* narratives, that is, by virtue of their relations—symbolic and material—with the socio-political elites. These relations were represented and reproduced within a master–servant dynamic, and often concealed forms of symbolic and material violence that were inherent to these relations. At the same time, the servants, as also the other ‘inferior’ groups, defended their interests by devising frameworks of contestation in the socio-political order; often these contestations occurred within a shared normative system, through an adroit manipulation of the ambiguities and silences within the shared order. The resistance of peripheral groups occurred within, and not outside of, the overarching elite normative structures.

The normative codes of behaviour, termed *adab*, that initially defined the Mughal aristocratic classes, came to be emulated more widely. *Adab* basically refers to etiquettes acquired through discipline and training. It means perfecting an individual’s external behaviour as well as the cultivation of inner moral qualities. It distinguishes cultivated behaviour from that deemed vulgar.<sup>61</sup> This ideal of *adab*, in a sense, created a hierarchical code from where both the elite as well as the marginalised sections could be judged for their service, loyalty, manliness and aesthetics. It was within an overarching norm of civility, or *adab*, that our *tazkiras* represent and judge the ordinary subjects. It is within *adab* tradition that master–servant relations were represented and reproduced in the dominant Indo-Persian literary tradition. Even though the counter-discourses about the servants are not available to us, the authors of the *tazkiras* presumed that lowly people, including servants, lacked *adab*. The stories of those amongst them who registered substantive upward mobility also serve to assert that *adab* could be acquired with individual endeavour, due loyalty on the part of the servants and probably corresponding grace on the part of their masters. In the political *tazkiras* written in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, the master–servant relations are represented with considerable variety, complexity and ambiguity. While there were multiple layers of subjection, even the most abject servant—a

<sup>61</sup> Metcalf, *Moral Conduct and Authority*, 1–20.



slave—was not without a subjectivity of her/his own. There is indeed a wide discrepancy between the legal, normative texts and the actual practice, in so far as the position of the slave in the elite households was concerned. While the legal texts depict the slave as an object, lacking agency, the description of the aristocratic households in our *tazkiras* communicates a more complex picture, one in which objectification went in hand with subjectivity as well as subjection. Violence, on the other hand, co-existed with emotional attachment and intimacy.

This chapter has argued that a domestic servant in Mughal India encompassed a wide range of relationships. While the master–slave relationship was predominantly a hierarchical one and had elements of subjection, it still encompassed layers of subordination, emotions and attachments. At the lowest level indeed, a servant was indistinguishable from a slave but then there are also instances in the literary sources where a servant enjoyed considerable agency, shares in resources and power as well. Looking at the representation of master–servant relationship in the biographical compendia, I have argued that the master–servant relationship was the primary structuring relationship in social life and served as a paradigm to a vast range of intimate, familial relations. Service, therefore, was not a source of social stigma, and in the literary representation, the category of an obedient servant could also carry, along with traces of subjection, attributes of privilege, honour and manliness.

## 4 | The Invisible Lives of *Davris* and *Badarans*

Exploring Affiliations and 'Friendships' within the *Janani Deorhi* in Early Modern Marwar\*

GEETANJALI TYAGI

### THE *DEORHI* AND POLITICS

This chapter explores the multiple aspects of the nature of affiliations, ties and dependencies that existed between the *ranis* (queens) of the Rajput royal households and their many support networks of servants, attendants and service providers working within the *janani deorhi* (household space meant for the females of the royal family) in Marwar between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, I focus on two categories of female servants/dependents, *badarans* (chief maid) and *davris* (female attendants/companions to the *ranis*).

The information available on households should not be treated as 'supplementary' or 'peripheral' to the more widely identifiable records related to the political set-up of the Rajput principalities. While analysing the very structure of the *janani deorhi* and the nature of the relationship between *ranis* and their dependents, I make a case for relocating the

\* I am immensely indebted to my mentor and friend, late Professor Nandita Prasad Sahai and for the encouraging support I received from Professor Rajat Datta, at Centre For Historical Studies, JNU, as many of the ideas discussed in this chapter have been inspired from our conversations together. My gratitude to the organisers and particularly to all the members of the editorial team, associated with the *Servants' Pasts*, for their valuable comments and constructive criticism on the earlier drafts of this chapter, which helped me significantly to flesh out the arguments further. I am thankful for their generous support and enduring patience. For any error, I remain responsible.

household-based intra-gender relationships to the centre of the historical analysis. The mundane concerns of the *deorhi*, its hierarchical arrangement, the provisions of services, and the organisation of work and labour in fulfilling everyday tasks reveal a fairly well-regulated politics of distance, difference and distinction that were symptomatic of the nature of larger social and political set-up it was embedded in. While one of the recent volumes on the long histories of the household raises a host of pertinent questions and identifies groups such as mothers, children and wives, and even relationships between fathers and daughters as potential themes for future research, it is surprising to see that servants and attendants do not find any direct mention.<sup>1</sup>

Janani *deorhi* had residents with varied relations with the king, for instance, daughters, mothers, sisters, maids and other kin relations alongwith queens and concubines. We are familiar that power as a concept has varied dimensions and it expresses itself through multiple mediums. Arguably, sexuality and its control was one of them. The gendered spatial division of *haram/zenana*, which has been heavily popularised by the Orientalising accounts of European travellers and later on by administrators, had a long impact on treating such a division between the court and household as absolute. This view, however, has been substantially revised.<sup>2</sup>

To 'see' janani *deorhi* as merely a segregated, secluded space—a domestic, private and docile household—would be a mistaken approach which would choke our understanding of the fluid dynamics of the workings of medieval Rajput 'family'. As recent scholarship has challenged the assumption of any pre-givenness of gender-segregated spaces, emphasising that the notion of public/private dichotomy was

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to Kumkum Roy, ed., *Looking Within, Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent through Time (Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai)* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2015). Individual essays in the volume do deal with some serving categories, for instance, of midwives. Also see Martha Ann Selby, 'Women as Patients and Practitioners in Early Sanskrit Medical Literature', in *Looking Within*, 49–73.

<sup>2</sup> Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21–22; also see Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6–7.

historically created, the very notion of the 'family' and household has been reformulated.<sup>3</sup> Though the sources are scarce and fragmented, it is quite clear that it was not just the *patrani* (chief queen) who exhibited interests in the state affairs but also other women of the royal household. Not just the ranis, but on several occasions other members, attendants and servants of the royal household such as concubines, badaran (chief maid), davris and *najars* (eunuchs, who were employed as palace guards) also played a significant role in the state politics.

There has been a long historiographical tradition of characterising the early modern period, that is from the fifteenth century to at least the seventeenth century, as one that perfected the idioms of 'imperial masculinity' through body comportment, *adab* and, not least, refinement of taste.<sup>4</sup> The growing significance of women, as noticed above, coincided with, what Urvashi Dalal has recently argued, a changed code of power in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> She identifies a growing femininisation of power in the eighteenth century in which not only royal women from the 'top' end of the family but also those from the 'bottom', such as slaves, courtesans and women of popular origins, became influential. This does not imply the disappearance of masculinity embedded in the organisation of power (as Dalal makes it clear that the articulation of femininity is heuristic), but 'the vital energy of femininity', as Dalal puts it, does open an interesting window to enter the world of janani deorhi to interrogate both the expansive as well as deep nature of ties of interdependence between ruling class women, on

<sup>3</sup> Lal, *Domesticity and Power*; Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*; Roy, *Looking Within*; Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Honoring the Family: Narratives and Politics of Rajput Kinship in Pre-Modern Rajasthan', in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 46–72. Also see Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), which raises the questions of protocols, manners and aesthetics in court society and attempts to understand the court as a significant sociological site for early Indian society. This feature of expanded households as distinct from the modern construction of 'private home' has also been true for early modern Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 1, 1999, 47–93.

<sup>5</sup> Urvashi Dalal, 'Femininity, State and Cultural Space in Eighteenth Century India', *Medieval History Journal* 18, no. 1, 2015, 120–65.

the one hand, and the men and women who served them, on the other.<sup>6</sup> The politics of legitimization that shot through ties of dependencies was equally intense within the *deorhi* as it was without.<sup>7</sup>

## SOURCES OF THE PERIOD

How easy is this conceptual design to be empirically realised for a period whose sources and traditions of recording the past were different from those achieved by the usual bureaucratic practices associated with a 'modern' state? To locate the first-hand accounts that would recreate a biographical life history of these dependent service providers working within the *janani deorhi* appears to be a distant dream.<sup>8</sup>

Two important genres of sources are available on this region, which I have extensively used for this chapter: *khyats* and *bahis*. *Khyats* are the clan histories written by *charans*, the court poets who were also court chroniclers and historians. Nainsi, whose *khyat* has been used here, was a contemporary of Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur in the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> His description, as would usually be in this genre, is primarily focused on the political activities of the Rajput aristocracy with women-related descriptions being limited to royal household incidents, marriages, illicit relationships and performance of acts of 'chivalry' such as *jauhar* and *sati*. Another *khyat*, *Rathoran ri khyat*, is perhaps unique as it provides a choronologically long compilation of details from the times of Rao Siha, the founder of the Marwar state (1112–1273), upto Maharaja Man Singh of

<sup>6</sup> Dalal is well aware of the gradations within courtesans. The *fahishas* (common prostitutes) could never attain such relevance as courtesans did. See Dalal, 'Femininity', 132. On the differences and gradations, see Shadab Bano, 'Women Performers and Prostitutes in Medieval India', *Studies in History* 27, no. 1, 2011, 41–53.

<sup>7</sup> Kumkum Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power: Explorations in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111–31.

<sup>8</sup> It remains so also for the later nineteenth century period, as shown by Nitin Varma in his chapter 'Ayahs and Female Waged Domestic in Nineteenth-Century India', in *Servants' Pasts: Late Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia*, ed. Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019) [forthcoming].

<sup>9</sup> Muhta Nainsi, *Nainsi ri Khyat*, ed. Badri Prasad Sakariya, 4 vols (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute [hereafter RORI], 1984).

Jodhpur (1803–43).<sup>10</sup> This khyat has a section on *raniwas* (where the ranis used to live), on their marriages, and cultural and religious contributions, which is useful for our purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the khyats were written by charans and *bhats* who were patronised by the rajas. While their writings are extremely useful for our historical reconstruction of the period, their own construction of the historical events was embedded in the act of patronage extended by the rajas. Charans were important agents in the construction of a cultural ethos congenial to the Rajput political system. Working with khyats, thus, is an act of double filtration: we have to identify the history of dependent ties for janani deorhi from the sources whose male authors were themselves dependent on rajas. Filtering one kind of patron–dependent relationship through texts that were products of another is just one example of the difficulty enshrined in the writing of servants’ pasts for this period.

While the political manoeuvres of the king and the acts of his nobility were recorded in these khyats, the lives of women, who did find consistent mention, were primarily recorded in the obvious choice of the rites-of-passage-type description, such as marriage, child birth and martyrdom

<sup>10</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, ed., *Rathoran ri Khyat*, 3 vols (Chopasani: Itihas Anusandhan Sansthan; Jodhpur: Rajasthani Granthagar, 2007). The fourth and the final volume of the *khyat* is still preserved in the Rajasthani Shodh Sansthan, Jodhpur. This khyat was recovered from the village Ujalan of *charans*, though we still do not know about the author and the time in which it was compiled.

<sup>11</sup> Other khyats used here are Rajkavi Shyamal Das, *Vir Vinod: Mewar ka Itihas*, 2 vols (Jodhpur: Rajasthani Granthagar, 2004, Vikram Samvat [VS] 1946/1889; subsequently published in 4 vols by Maharana Mewad Historical Publication, Udaipur, 2017). Das was Maharana Sajjan Singh’s court poet and the khyat covers the period until 1884, that is, the reign of the Maharana. *Banki Das ri Khyat* of Jodhpur is another important khyat of Marwar area. Banki Das lived under the patronage of Maharaja Man Singh. His khyat is a collection of 3,000 *vats* (tale, epic or prose narrative), which give us details about various dynasties of Rajputs. Pandit Narottam Swami, ed., *Banki Das ri Khyat*, Granthak 21 (Jodhpur: RORI, 1989). I have also used information from khyats of the three maharajas of the Jodhpur household—Narayan Singh Bhati, ed., *Maharaja Man Singhji ri khyat*, Granthak 133 (Jodhpur: RORI, 1997); Brajesh Kumar Singh, ed., *Maharaja Vijay Singhji ri khyat*, Granthak 185 (Jodhpur: RORI, 1997); and Narayan Singh Bhati, ed., *Maharaja Takht Singhji ri khyat*, Granthak 176 (Jodhpur: RORI, 1993). These khyats give details of the various events pertaining to the reigns of the respective maharajas.

for proving conjugal chastity.<sup>12</sup> Such a binary tends to create a rather simplistic impression that women were merely 'second fiddles' in the making of royal Rajputs as compared to men who were engaged in battles and wars, consolidating the state. This is where our second genre of source, the janani deorhi *bahis*, becomes important as it provides evidences that question the khyat narratives on women's role and their place in the process of making, upholding, maintaining and preserving the identity of royal Rajputs. These bahis or ledgers/accounts books are the record books of day-to-day expenditures incurred on the management of the janani deorhi.<sup>13</sup> Within this corpus are *hath kharach ri bahis*, which were specific record books related to the personal income and expenditure of the ranis. While existing studies on Rajasthan, especially by Varsha Joshi and Shashi Arora,<sup>14</sup> have used source material from the corpus of bahis in order to decode the workings of the existent polygamous household and the role of women in it, for us, when thinking about the interpenetration of household and court, rajas and ranis, and within deorhi the ranked status of a variety of women, these bahis can be read from an alternative perspective than that of khyats. But together, khyat and bahi provide an explanation of how invisibility could be a function of the nature of the sources and yet our attempt to reconstruct the fragmented lives of such subjects depends on them.

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, the Rajput households of the eighteenth century differ from what Dalal has described for northern India, especially while exploring the idea of visibility of women. She argues that the nude female body was almost a new genre of painting in the Mughal miniature and it made a forceful appearance in the eighteenth century. Dalal, 'Femininity', 143.

<sup>13</sup> The *bahis* pertaining to the janani deorhi of the Jodhpur royal household are preserved in the Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash Library, Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur. They are about 10,000 in number, out of which about 3,000 have been listed, though their cataloguing is still in progress. The language used in the bahis is Marwari, and we do not find page numbers in these bahis as there was no tradition of putting page numbers in medieval registers of Jodhpur. For the sake of convenience, however, the staff in charge of the maintenance of these bahis has started listing page numbers on the documents.

<sup>14</sup> See Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women & Society Among Rajputs* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1995); Shashi Arora, 'Status of Women in Rajasthan', in *Some Aspects of Socio-Economic History of Rajasthan*, ed. G. S. L. Devra (Jodhpur: Jagdish Singh Gahlot Research Institute, 1980), 61–74.

## JANANI DEORHI: MANY WORLDS WITHIN, TIES TO OUTSIDE

In order to understand the lives of servants, attendants and service providers to the Rajput ranis, it is imperative to analyse the structural organisation of the janani deorhi and within it the varied structures of relationships and their forms of interdependencies. This helps us to understand the relationship between 'the house as a physical structure and the household as a social formation', constituted through marriage, birth, services and physical and emotional ties.<sup>15</sup>

Janani deorhi, also variously called *rawla* or *raniwas*, was the name assigned to that specific area of the fort which was meant exclusively for the female relatives of the Rajput king (see Figure 4.1).<sup>16</sup> In the context of royal Rajputs, the term *raja's darbar* (court) conveys a sense of 'political' space whereas the term *janani deorhi* implies more of a household space where rani and other female members, like *majisas* (mothers), *baijis* (daughters, sisters), *davris* (female attendants/servants/companions to the ranis), *badarans* (senior/chief maid or female servants), *pardayats* (concubines) and *paswans* (concubines, dancers), resided. It is important to note that *janani deorhi* included a range of female relatives of the *raja*, not merely his sexual partners, but also a wide array of attendants and servants of the *rani* herself, which further questions the image of the *janani deorhi*

<sup>15</sup> Roy, *Looking Within*, 7. For more on household, see Roy, *Power of Gender*, 70–87; also see Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 113–55; Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 103–39; and Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Janani Deorhi Bahi* No. 210, Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash (hereafter MMPP), Jodhpur. Terms such as *raniwas* and *antehpur* were interchangeably used such as in *Ranimanga Bhaton ki Bahi*, *Marwar ka Raniwas*, VS 970–VS 1957, MMPP, Jodhpur. *Ranimanga Bhaton ki Bahi* comes across as an extremely intriguing primary source, both for the kind of details it shares and for its authorship. The term *ranimanga bhat* means genealogist or court chronicler who received their income from ranis only or worked only for them. Theirs remained an exclusive category of record keepers, registering details only for the ranis of the Rajput households. *Ranimanga Bhaton ki Bahi* has information related to the names of ranis, their natal households from VS 963 to Maharaja Jaswant Singh II period. The edited version has been titled as *Ranimanga Bhaton ki Bahi*, *Marwar ka Raniwas*, ed. Mahendra Singh Nagar (Jodhpur: Rajasthani Granthagar, 2002), which remains a copy of the original work by Bhat Kehardan and Daudan, compiled in VS 1975/1918.





FIGURE 4.1: Janani Deorhi, Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur

Photograph by author.

as merely a pleasure resort for the raja, an idea which commonsensically has been attached to the words *haram*, *zenana* or *janani deorhi*.

The courtly culture of medieval and Mughal India has been studied in some great detail.<sup>17</sup> In the last decade or so, the medieval courtly and political culture, the early modern monastic governmentality and the modern reformist politics have all been examined to suggest that household and home are spaces where identities get constructed, practices of everyday get shaped, and the ‘politics’ of the public are debated and determined. In other words, in the Rajput case, the *deorhi* was the household space of the Rajput politics, inhabited by kins and dependents across generations who were tied through blood, acquisition and patronage. The *deorhis* were also home to elite women from other noble households, with whom the raja maintained marital alliances, a mechanism through which the status of the household was not only inscribed but also displayed.

<sup>17</sup> See Ali, *Courtly Culture*; Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*.

The hierarchical order of the janani deorhi can be understood through the figures of *rajmata* or *majisa* (mother of the raja), *patrani* (chief queen), *ranis*; the concubines, that is, the *pardayats* and *paswans*; other female relatives of the ruler; and finally through the presence of the vast retinue of domestic attendants. Each rani had a separate establishment in the janani deorhi. She had her own set of individual attendants who were collectively known by the name of the rani they served, such as *Rathorniji ki sarkar*, *Jhaliji ki sarkar*. The word *sarkar*, which otherwise in this period would mean the court or government, and here means a set-up or establishment, itself suggests the semantic porousness between public and private. As argued in the introduction to the present volume, the manner of naming and calling the servants/dependents reveals a lot about subjectivity and its subsumption. Drawing identity from the name and status of the masters and mistresses indicates the claims of trust and dependency as embedded in these relationships. These *sarkars* were, in many respects, autonomous units.<sup>18</sup> The attendants included *dhai maas* (wet nurses),<sup>19</sup> *dholans* (female drummers), *purohits* (priests), *nayans* (female barbers), *darjans* (female tailors) and *davris* (female attendants).<sup>20</sup> This shows that individuals belonging to different castes and employed in work-specific tasks worked within female quarters.

Another way of understanding the hierarchy is by looking at the positions of the attendants. Each of them was tied through tasks (most probably, also through caste identification) but each of them also operated within the hierarchical gradation based on access, intimacy and purity. The priests and *nayans*, for instance, did not share the same ritual status. The practice of gift giving is a good example to show how both patronage and hierarchy within groups of attendants worked. We do have details of the various items of gifts and amounts of money presented to the members of the royal household including *maharani*, *maji*, *kakiji*, *bhabhiji* and *bahu* (females residing within the janani deorhi).<sup>21</sup> The womenfolk who were

<sup>18</sup> Saubhaghya Singh Shekhawat, 'Rajasthani Ranwaso Ke Patra', *Shodh Patrika*, October–December 1970, 65–72; also see Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*.

<sup>19</sup> *Maharaja Vijay Singh re Raj mein Kapadan re Kothar ri Bahi*, VS 1822, S. No. 300, MMPP, Jodhpur.

<sup>20</sup> Shashi Arora, *Rajasthan mein Nari ki Stithi* (Bikaner: Prerna Prakashan, 1981), 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Dastur Komwar*, Vol. 25, VS 1859, 1862/1802, 1805, Rajasthan State Archives

senior in stature, or were favourites of the king, received grants in gold *mohurs*, jewel-studded costumes and a variety of fine clothes (e.g. *masoor butadar*). The daughters of the rulers also received gifts. And finally, all categories of servants and service providers such as *khawas*, *pardayats*, *badarans* and *patars* were given gifts usually in *rupaiya*, embroidered cottons and skirts. These servants were listed in the register in the order of their service hierarchy and the nature of the gifts received by them varied accordingly. The act of 'gifting' to the servants and subordinates can be seen as a universal mode of communicating authority by the elites from 'above to below', ensuring the reproduction and sustenance of patron-client networks and relationship, and thereby maintaining the hierarchy and status by gifting 'coded substances'. The custom of 'giving' and 'gifting' prevalent in Rajput court culture provides us with entrypoints to understand various expressions of power, legitimacy and authority wherein giving of gifts and works of piety helped in forming a zone of acceptance among the receivers. A comparative study of the ethics of 'giving' and 'gifting', observed and performed both within the raja's *darbar*, *mardana deorhi* and *janani deorhi*, shows us how the notions of hierarchy, distinction and loyalty were crucial intergrals in the 'making' of the elite, and subsequently in distancing and differentiating them from the 'subordinate'. Stewart Gordon analyses the ceremony of *khilat* or *sar-upa*, found in much of South Asia in the precolonial and colonial periods, in which a ruler (or one holding the authority from a ruler) presented luxurious garments (often silk) to a recipient. The outfit

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Bikaner (RSAB). The *Dastur Rajlok* collection from RSAB includes *Jaipur* records, from late seventeenth century to early nineteenth century, of which *Dastur Komwar* reveals that the state granted gifts to the various members of the royal family. Volume 24, comprising 1,027 pages, provides details of the various items of gifts and amount of money presented to members of the royal household. Volume 25, comprising 1,067 pages, elaborates on the gifts granted to the daughters of Jaipur rulers under the segment titled *Rajlok Baiji*. Daughters of the royal family received gifts on various festivals, especially *rakhi*, and they further presented gifts to the other members and service providers within their respective *janani deorhis* like *khawas*, *pardayats*, *badarans* and *patars*. Thus, volumes 24 and 25 of *Dastur Komwar* provide us with these rich details about the ethic and culture of 'gifting' and 'giving' with Rajput royal households, forging connect, measuring hierarchy, affiliation, proximity and status within the larger social domain.

always included a robe—the most visible outer courtly garment—but might also include items meant to be worn ‘from head to foot’ (sar-upa) such as a turban, a mid-section wrap, belt and shoes. The ceremony took place in a public setting (court, battlefield) before an audience often attired in similar luxurious robes.<sup>22</sup> A robe carried the *baraka* (essence) of its former possessor and influenced the behaviour of the receiver. The main characteristic of the system was that *khil’at* established a client–patron relationship between the giver and the receiver. The first requirement of the ceremony was, therefore, to establish clearly who was to give and who was to receive.<sup>23</sup> Garment giving, as a ceremony that binded the giver and the receiver, was prevalent across much of Eurasia, from the ancient Near East to China and as far as medieval Iceland.<sup>24</sup>

This hierarchy within the Rajput janani deorhi was also constituted through control and supervision that exposes the organisation of attendants along gendered lines. The *darogha* (superintendent) and his assistants in charge of the administration of the janani deorhi were male. For the purpose of security, *deorhidars* (gatekeepers) were appointed by the daroghas in consultation with the ruler. Their main duty consisted of looking after the safety and security of the females residing within the janani deorhi. A chief officer named *darogha-i-janani* deorhi was the overall incharge for security and administration of deorhis. He was appointed by the raja. Each and every work of the janani deorhi related to marriage, death and festivals was arranged by the darogha.<sup>25</sup> On account of the important position daroghas held, they were allotted *jagirs* (land grants) in lieu of their pay. Next to darogha was *naib darogha* (deputy darogha) who took charge in the absence of his superior. Deorhidars to the janani deorhi were appointed by the darogha-i-janani deorhi in consultation with the rani (they accompanied not only ranis but also

<sup>22</sup> Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes of Honour, Khil’at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1. At times, it took place in a non-performative moment of distress, as shown in the cases of Humayun and Jawhar Aftabchi in Sajjad Alam Rizvi’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, *Robes of Honour*, 4–5.

<sup>24</sup> Gavin R. G. Hambly, ‘The Emperor’s Clothes: Robing and “Robes of Honour” in Mughal India’, in *Robes of Honour*, 31–49.

<sup>25</sup> *Dastur Komwar*, Vol. 25, VS 1862/1805.

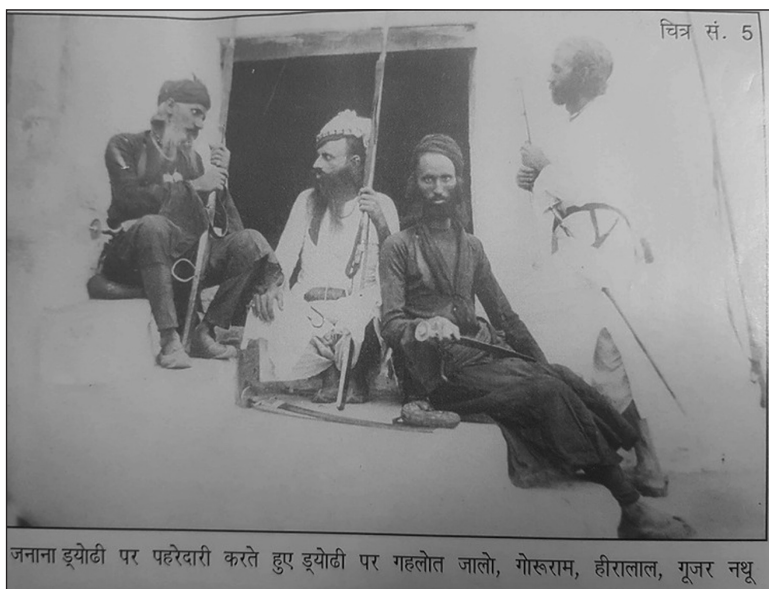


FIGURE 4.2: *Deorhidars* Gehlot Jalo, Goruram, Hiralal and Gujar Nathu are Seen in Service, Guarding the Janani Deorhi

Source: *Khanda Byav ri Bahi*, translated as *Khanda Vivah Bahi*, ed. Mahendra Singh. Nagar, Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash (MMPP), Mehrangarh, Jodhpur, 2004 (from Maharaja Takht Singh's period).

pardayats on their excursion or pilgrimage) (Figure 4.2).<sup>26</sup> Appointment of eunuchs for such 'trusted' work as guarding the female quarters was a general practice in this period. During Maharaja Vijay Singh's time (1753–93), najars Santokiram, Pawar Narsingh Das and Hardas were appointed to this post.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes, they were paid in cash, at other times through grant of land. *Purbias* and *huzuris* (guards) were also maintained in the janani deorhi for security purposes.<sup>28</sup>

The security arrangement of the deorhi was meticulously observed.

<sup>26</sup> *Haqiqat Bahi*, Jodhpur, dated miti vaisakh vad 5 VS 1827/1770, RSAB.

<sup>27</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, ed., *Rathoran ri Khyat*, vol. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Haqiqat Bahi*, Jodhpur, VS 1832/1775, RSAB.

Prior permission was required to enter the janani deorhi.<sup>29</sup> When wives of some nobles desired to visit, they had to first notify the darogha of the palace. The darogha then sent their request to the naib darogha and deorhidars of the palace after which those who were eligible were given the permission. Even after receiving permission, each visitor to the deorhi was scrutinised at the entrance by badarans, davris and also by najars. Those who neglected these rules were punished by the maharaja.

Regulating the access to female quarters does give the impression that these were secluded spaces. But, to remind, access to courts (and observance of proper etiquettes in doing so) was also regulated. It is, of course, a reflection of the patriarchal control that servants and subordinates entrusted with the manning of the gates and deorhis were appointed by the raja.

Similar to Mughal practices, the employment of najars in deorhis was widespread in Rajput principalities too. Ilmaas and Sibhram worked as najars for rani Raikanwar Bhattiyani of Maharaja Man Singh (1803–43).<sup>30</sup> Like other palace servants, they were organised on a hierarchical basis, with the senior eunuchs called najars. They enjoyed the closest company of the maharani, ranis and pardayats, in that the najar was the only non-female person who could move in the deorhi without any restriction.<sup>31</sup> This practice also existed in other parts of the world, as a result of which 'eunuch loyalty' became an important institution in the medieval Muslim world. The Mughals called them *khawajasaras* and appointed them to guard the harem.<sup>32</sup>

Ranis and their attendants went on excursions and pilgrimages with guards. Most of these guards except najars usually inhabited the in-between world from the threshold of the deorhi to the outside world, including the court. Najars also freely accessed the places inside the deorhis. These guards and najars were also a medium, a link for ranis to connect to the courts. In the states of Udaipur and Bundi, the main work of najars was not inside the deorhi but in conveying messages from ranis to the state officials and back. This liminal standing in both female quarters and darbar allowed

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *Ranimanga Bhaton ki Bahi*, Jodhpur.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

them to become powerful actors in the state politics, whenever possible.<sup>33</sup> Another official who provided the link was *kamdar*. Each rani was allotted an independent jagir as *hath kharach ri jagir* for personal maintenance. They had their respective kamdars for the management of their jagirs.

One can notice from the above discussion that janani deorhi was a well-organised, hierarchically instituted space with varied designations and systematic division of work amongst the many support networks and service providers. Some of them were employed within the deorhi, some to man the entries to the deorhis and still some to connect deorhis to the outer world. The state invested in establishing and maintaining the janani deorhi in such a way that created a 'distinct' sense of identity for the women of the royal household. The impression of 'segregation' which comes out is not to be confused with the *disconnect* between the household and the state but, on the contrary, was the product of the active regulation of resource allotment, control of movement and arrangement for provisions. It requires further research but perhaps it can be argued that this world of connectedness of the public and private, of the household and the state, which a host of scholars have argued for in recent years, was crucially dependent on a set of servants, attendants and employees who served as a link. Further, if one wishes to extend Dalal's extremely convincing argument about the growing femininity of the power itself or, at least in the Rajput case, of the ranis' increasing influence in matters of state policy, then the servants' role has to be thoroughly explored not only as loyal attendants but also as collectors of news and information.

## PERSONAL ATTENDANCE: TASTE AND SERVICES

The maintenance of life inside the household required performance of services. The bahis provide us with insights on the culture of taste, refinement and appearance, the expenses incurred on them, and the mobilisation of services that would have been involved. Enormous amount of money was spent by the royal ladies on dresses and ornaments. Making the ranis appear 'beautiful' required a variety of work. The

<sup>33</sup> For example, Panna Miyan at the time of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh I (Jaipur) and Mohan *najar* after the death of Maharaja Jagat Singh of Jaipur. Das, *Vir Vinod*, vol. 1.

services provided by *rangrez* (dyer), *sunar* (goldsmith) and *darzi* (tailor) were crucial to accomplish this. We should also bear in mind that the details of a rani's expenditure were very well recorded; it could have been a marker of status for a rani to exhibit her sense of aesthetics and culture that she acquired in her natal household which she then brought to her new household.<sup>34</sup>

In a *bahi* pertaining to Maharani Teeja Bhattiyani of Maharaja Man Singh (1803–43), information on her lifestyle and expenditure has been discussed at length. There is mention of colouring of muslin cloth together with special reference to the work of *bandej* (a type of textile designing involving the tie-and-dye method of colouring, also popularly known as *bandhani*), which definitely indicates its consumption by the higher sections of the society. For dyeing or colouring, two specific communities are mentioned, one of *rangrez* and the other of *patwa*, who are still a part of this trade.

The *bahis* give details of payments made to these artisans such as *rangrez*, *sunar* and *darzi* who provided the services.<sup>35</sup> In the eighteenth-century Rajasthan, the market exchange economy had already existed but in elite households such services had a personalised characteristic. These *bahis* indicate a kind of obsessive attention that was directed towards dyeing, stitching and styling of dresses, and designing of ornaments for members of the royal household in general and of Rajput queens in particular. If tastes were personalised and socially valued, did attendant services also follow them? Through commodities and consumption, can we infer the nature of master–servant relationship? In other contexts, particularly of colonial households in eastern India, we do know how the theft of commodities structured the disciplinary axis of the master–servant relationship. Did ideas of taste and refinement do the same? From *bahis* alone it is not possible to answer these questions, but they are worth raising to think deeper about the role of material objects and social relations.

<sup>34</sup> For more details on the idea of distinction, taste and aesthetics, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>35</sup> *Maharaja Jaswant Singh Dwatitiya re Samay Darziyann re Mehantana re Khatan ri Bahi*, VS 1929–30/1872–73, MMPP, Jodhpur.



What does appear from these sources is that the nexus between the rani and her various artisanal service providers was not merely servile in nature but also based upon mutual dependency in appreciating and promoting tastes and aesthetics valued in the royal household. There are, of course, shared codes of cultural refinement as we know from the ‘manuals’ of *Mirzanama*, but the process of acquisition of those manners, etiquettes and taste is also personally constituted. Taste and refinement provide a distinct sense of identity. In a polygamous household like Janani Deorhi, where ranis of different ranks, concubines of varying importance and attendants of personalised loyalties existed, such distinctiveness in dress, style and jewellery would have mattered a lot, if not for anything else, then to remain favourite in the raja’s book. This ‘connected dependence’ of ranis on her servants and service providers comes out well in instances of the former insisting on getting their work done by their favourite attendants only. In these households, the needs were culturally same, but also specific, which required special care.

## DAVRIS AND BADARANS: LOYALTY, PATRONAGE AND POWER

Davris were important attendants in the service of ranis.<sup>36</sup> The institution of davris was well organised and had evolved over a long period of time. They were appointed either by the ruler or by the queen herself, but they acquired a hereditary occupation status. They were often given as part of dowry by a Rajput chief to his daughter.<sup>37</sup> They were also known as *khalsawaliyan*, that is, davris who came along with the rani from her

<sup>36</sup> Discussion on the role of davris became more nuanced while using insights from Joshi’s, *Polygamy and Purdah*; also see Mahendra Singh Nagar, *Marwar ke Rajwansh ki Sanskritik Paramparayein*, vol. 2 (Jodhpur: MMPP, Mehrangarh Fort, 2001), 564.

<sup>37</sup> Arora, *Rajasthan mein Nari ki Stithi*, 78. Also see Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*. At times, entire families of *daroghas* were given in dowry to Rajput princesses. The maharajas and the bigger jagirdars also gave some families of different castes in dowry. In this category came the *kamdar*, *dhai* (wet nurse), *darzi*, *rangrez*, *brahmini* (female priest), *dhoban* (washer-woman). The idea was to give one family of each of these professions to not let the newly married daughter depend on the in-laws’ establishment. *Janani Deorhi Bahi*, no. 2840, VS 1951/1894, MMPP, Jodhpur.

natal household as a part of her dowry in marriage. Later, after the death of that rani, they became a part of the *rajkhalsa* (the state department for attendants). This meant that their payment as well as other expenditures were henceforth taken care of by the *rajkhalsa*. These *davris* were further allowed to join the service of other ranis, if they wished, in the case of the death of their patron rani.<sup>38</sup>

Ranis needed female companions, attendants and servants to look after them and share their anxieties, since within a polygamous household it was usually difficult to establish bonds of trust with other ranis. A father, therefore, at the time of his daughter's marriage, sent some ladies with her who would not only comfort and care for her but also stand by her in times of distress. The intrigues and counter-intrigues of the *janani deorhi* necessitated the presence of females from the rani's natal household who could be trusted upon than being dependent only on servants from the husband's side. The importance of generational association based on affective kinship is clearly evident in such an arrangement.

For trust, comfort and protection, the duties of personal *davris* who came with the rani in dowry were confined to the person with whom they had entered the *deorhi*. Some senior and experienced *davris* were also temporarily sent along with the bride. Working as mentors, they helped the bride to adjust herself to the ways of the in-law's family. Once this was achieved, these *davris* returned to the natal household.

From Rajasthan, we find many incidents demonstrative of *davris*' loyalty towards their ranis and their sacrifices. One such popular narrative is that of Bharmali of Chittor. After the death of Rana Mokul, Kumbha became the Maharana of Chittor; Kumbha at that time was minor in age. His maternal uncle, Rao Ranmal of Jodhpur, came to Chittor in order to take revenge for the murder of his brother-in-law Mokul and also to assist his sister in the administration of the state. Ranmal wanted to take advantage of the minority of Kumbha. His plan was to kill Kumbha and annex Chittor to his empire. Ranmal was very friendly to Bharmali who was the *davri* of Kumbha's mother Rathorniji. One night, when Ranmal was under the influence of liquor, during a conversation he revealed to Bharmali his plan of murdering Kumbha. Bharmali was very close

<sup>38</sup> Nagar, *Marwar ke Rajwansh*, 2: 565.

to Ranmal, but still remained loyal to her rani. Without caring for her relationship with Ranmal and the temptation of acquiring more power through Chittor's annexation to Marwar, she immediately passed on the information to Rathorniji. On hearing this, Rathorniji at once summoned Rawal Chunda and in consultation with him took the necessary steps. Thus, because of Bharmali's loyalty both the Maharana and Chittor were saved.<sup>39</sup>

Incidentally, another tale, which is also very popular, too has the davri's name as Bharmali but this one is about betrayal rather than loyalty. Known as the story of *roothi rani* (aggrieved and estranged queen), it goes like this: Rao Maldeo of Jodhpur married Rani Umade Bhattiyani. On the night of their marriage, when Umade was waiting for her raja to meet her, as a gesture to express her honour, she sent her most trusted and dear maid Bharmali to bring him to her chamber. Maldeo was under the influence of liquor and was longing to see his beloved but in her place when he saw Bharmali, he got enticed by her and delayed visiting Umade. Rani Umade, searching for her husband, came over to see him where she found him with Bharmali. The rani was outraged and extremely annoyed at the incident; she saw it as a breach of trust on the part of both the raja and her close maid Bharmali. Umade left the deorhi of Jodhpur and never reconciled in her entire life, despite repeated efforts by Maldeo. For Umade, it was against her *aan* (honour) to accept a scenario like this. There are many versions of this story in oral histories of Rajasthan but the prominent features that emerged were the disloyalty of Bharmali for her rani, the breach of trust by the raja and the strong resolve in her resentment that Umade nurtured for the rest of her life. Umade is also popularly known as *roothi rani*.<sup>40</sup>

These tales obviously defy any essentialisation about how notions of loyalty were observed by davris. Both these tales, nonetheless, in their stark contrast bring out the centrality of loyalty, which davris either practised or were expected to. Second, the shadowy existence of davris is attested to by their 'compulsory' movement with the young mistress of the natal house on the occasion of marriage. While for the king, the queen and their households, marriage symbolised the making of the new

<sup>39</sup> Das, *Vir Vinod*, vol. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Rani Laxmi Kumari Chundawat, *Love Stories of Rajasthan, Bharmali* (Jodhpur: Book Treasure, 2008), 21–38; also see Rani Laxmi Kumari Chundawat, *Rajwadi Lokgeet* (Jaipur: Shyam Prakashan, 2000), 64–69.

kinship, we do not know what this displacement meant to *davris* who also moved from one to the other household but without marriage. As the second story would suggest, one of the ways available for overcoming this 'social death' was to make new alliances, arguably physical, and either in 'illicit' or overt way become part of some kinship formation. I call it illicit not because it might have remained an aberration; in fact, as works on other regions, particularly on Bengali Nawabi, have shown, incorporation of maids and slaves girls into kinship formation was fairly routine. I call it illicit because, as the story shows, such formations, at least were not approved by some people; in this case, principally the *rani* to whom the *davri* was formally tied in a subjugated relationship. The fact that the normative axis of the ties was of subjugation or, in fact, of complete abnegation is proven by evidences of female dependents committing sati alongwith their *ranis*. Rani Devdiji of Maharaja Man Singh was accompanied by her *badaran* on the pyre of sati.<sup>41</sup> At the death of Maharaja Abhay Singh (1724-49) in Pushkar, 13 women—2 *khawas* and 11 *pardayats*—committed sati.<sup>42</sup>

Why would female attendants perform sati for *rajas* to whom they were not (officially) wedded? One answer is in the notion of the extended household and broad kinship formation practices which women of different ranks—consorts, concubines, attendants, slaves and servants—were part of. Another way to understand it is through the loose seams of master-servant relationship as an influencing template for ordering many other forms of social relationships, including divine. Perceptions formed on the basis of literature from the *charans* as well as information culled from the state records suggest the association of the ideals of chastity (*sat*) and sacrifice with the performance of *sahagaman* (leaving together; in the case of sati, dying together). Adherence to the Rajput values of being a chaste wife by observing the notions of honour and devotion for the husband is asserted by the *charans* and *bhats* in Rajasthan. So, if the wife was morally required or expected to express this devotion (to her master), the same template of complete submission would have also worked for the close female attendants. For, as the entry of the attendants into the

<sup>41</sup> Nagar, *Marwar ke Rajwansh*, vol. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, ed., *Rathoran ri Khyat*, vol. 2. *Khawas* usually refer to slaves.

household was structured along 'collapsed subjectivities' with the mistress, so would perhaps be the exit and death.

The *davris* were given salary both in cash and kind (in the form of food grains and other items), maintained mainly within the *hath kharach jagris* of the *ranis*, allotted to them by the *raja*. Their numbers became the symbol of status and honour and a mode of inscribing distinction among *ranis*. Sources do not allow going deeper into understanding the relationship between *davris* of one *deorhi* and another. Did they imbue *ranis*' jealousy for each other? *Davris* were themselves divided into statuses. There was a well-established hierarchy among them. Some of them were promoted as *deorhidars*, *darogha*, *badaran*, *chobdar*, *charidar*, etc. Usually, the position of *deorhidar* remained with a male member or with the *najar*, but at times females were also appointed as *deorhidars*. At the lowest rung of the ladder were the *davris*.

The chief maid of *janani deorhi* was named *badaran*.<sup>43</sup> She was the organiser and coordinator of the *deorhi*. This post was generally given to an elderly and experienced lady. She used to receive more salary, *jagir* and jewellery in comparison to other maids. Her main work was the supervision of other maids and conveying messages from the ladies in the *deorhi* to the state officials (the work of facilitating communication within the spaces of both *mardana* and *janani deorhi* was designated to a range of attendants, depending on their accessibility to these respective spaces of the *garh/fort*; therefore, categories of *badaran*, *najar* and *darogha*, among others, were all negotiating in-between these spaces, communicating messages and exchanging information). She accompanied the *maharanis* and *ranis* on their visits outside of the *deorhi*. In other words, she was the mediator between them and the state officials. This access or proximity to the courtly public did not mean laxity in adherence to the *pardah* system. Messages were conveyed either from behind the curtain or the window.<sup>44</sup> At a time, there could be two or three *badarans* in *janani deorhi* but only one of them received the honour of *raj badaran* (chief *badaran*).

The *badarans* tended to become more powerful particularly during a minor's rule because it was not possible for the *rajmata* (mother dowager)

<sup>43</sup> Arora, *Rajasthan mein Nari ki Stithi*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> *Kota Records, Bhandar* no. 3, VS 1927/1870, RSAB.

to communicate directly with the chiefs due to the constraints of the purdah system. If loyalty brought proximity, then proximity lugged power on its back. They gained in power not only because of their seniority among attendants but also through their advantage as partakers in the dowager's secrets (a polygamous household would have competitive secrets and jealousies to guard off). There are instances of the same from house of Jaipur. When Rajmata Bhattiyani was acting as the regent to Jai Singh III (1818–35), she appointed Rupa badaran as raj badaran, which invested in the latter unchallenged authority not only to control and manage affairs related to the royal household, but also to intervene in and register her presence on important instances of decision-making. Rupa became very powerful because she had great influence in the palace and still greater in the circle of the officers of the state. In their capacity as messengers between the mardana (male space) and the janani deorhi, badarans were in direct know-how of the interior chambers of the palace. This allowed them to sometimes exert power in state politics.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

There existed a strong affiliation between the rani and her various categories of officials, attendants, maids and other types of service providers. There were, of course, different registers of this affiliation. Some were folded into the subjectivities of their ranis to allow mounting the pyre of the sati, others were simply structured in a way that tied servants and service providers through personal demands of taste and refinement. Though the evidences are scarce, we also find references to servants overturning the 'ethical' codes of the relationship. The examples of Rupa badaran and maid Bharmali of Umade Bhattiyani appear before us to name a few.

The presence of a well hierarchised set-up of janani deorhi, with varied categories of officials, service providers and servants, was integral to the construction of the grandeur image of the Rajput royal household as well as to cultivate and project the values of 'honour', 'status' and 'chastity' of their women. The deorhi from inside, nonetheless, was a segregated space based on intimacy, dependence and access to the courtly public. The transactive

<sup>45</sup> Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*.

relation based on wages and payments was conjoined with ideas of extreme subjugation. Even in death perhaps the distinction was maintained. We wonder if there would be any sati shrines of *davris* and *badarans*.

*Deorhis* were spaces of tensions and insecurities. The *ranis* were 'regulated', 'protected' and assisted within the domestic. Keeping in mind the complexities of the system of multiple marriages, the affiliation of the *ranis* with their female support networks consisting of *badarans*, *davris* and other attendants suggests the forging of bonds of trust and sharing. The idea of an 'extended' family (as in most of the cases the female attendants of the *ranis* joined her from her natal household itself) provided comfort in an atmosphere of contentious and conflicting loyalties. At the same time, when *badarans* and *najars* provided *ranis* with assistance, they also, quite simultaneously, acted as the agents of regulation and protection. Though occupying the place of subordination, they also sought power. This chapter has explored the ways in which, while being loyally subjugated, the *deorhi* servants also worked as a crucial link between the domestic and the public, none of which were neatly carved out in the period of this study.

## 5 | Service, Sex and Sentiments

### Concubinage in the Early Modern Rajput Household of Marwar

PRIYANKA KHANNA

Despite their pervasive presence in the South Asian past, the history of servants and service has been marginal to the historiography of South Asia. The term ‘servant’, as chapters in this volume suggest, is a relational term that encapsulates a range of relationships based on hierarchy and affect. This chapter explores the relational workings of master–servant by examining the institution of concubines in the ruling Rajput household of Marwar in Jodhpur (western Rajasthan) between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

The prevalence of the practice of concubinage, or relations outside of marriage, is a well acknowledged historical fact across cultures, especially in the context of the elite households of the past. Across an array of diverse regions and cultures, around the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, historians have brought forth that *vaipatti/nataksala* in the elite households of Marathas, *aghacha/paristarani/khawas-i-khidmatgaran* in the Mughal household, *haseki* in Ottoman Empire, *qie/ch’ie* in China and *mekake* in Japan were some titles for concubines across these cultures.<sup>1</sup> As far as

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, V. S. Kadam, ‘The Dancing Girls of Maharashtra’, in *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society*, ed. Anne Feldhaus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 61–89; Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Shadab Bano, ‘Marriage and Concubinage in the Mughal Imperial Family’, *Proceedings of The Indian History Congress* 60, 1999, 353–62; Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Yifeng Zhao, ‘Concubinage in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature: A Historical Study of Xing-shi yin-yuan zhuan’, *Past Imperfect* 4, 1995, 57–79; Hsieh Bao



this literature reflects the distinct ways in which concubines buttressed the power of their masters, it also suggests that the category of concubine defies an easy categorisation for it was placed on an ambiguous margin of kinship and servility. Perhaps, it is owing to their obscure position that concubines are often popularly perceived as sex slaves. Sexual service was indeed an important component in the formation of the category of concubine, but that was not all. The category embodied multiple forms of service, status and subordination that were defined through a threefold hierarchical axis of caste, community and gender.

In the Rajput society, a ruler's concubine was drawn primarily from the 'lower'/secondary or non-ruling Rajput communities. The status of concubine was a permanent one with no scope for achieving the status of marriage. In fact, a strict demarcation was maintained between the concubines and the queens (as wives) who were customarily drawn from 'elite' Rajput communities. This distinction was also achieved by disenfranchising the sons of concubines from claims to throne and restricting the concubines' progeny with rules of endogamous marriages. These promulgations, while helping the ruling Rajputs to retain the superiority of their lineage, closed the opportunities of social escalation for concubines and their progeny.

Conversely, the position of a concubine superseded the ranks of all other female service providers in the polygynous Rajput *janana*, also known as the *janani deorhi* (the space earmarked for women in Rajput palaces). Such demarcation was crafted by providing concubines with several royal prerogatives including a retinue of personal servants. This relative elevation of concubines did not, however, negate their subordinate status vis-à-vis their master(s)—the Maharaja, his royal family and the state—and several distinctions were kept in place to maintain the ambiguous status of concubines as the 'elevated dependents' of the

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Hua, *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China* (Lanham, US: Lexington Books, 2014); Rubie S. Watson, 'Wives, Concubines, and Maids: Servitude and Kinship in the Hong Kong Region, 1900–1940', in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese History*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 231–55; Dorothy Ko, 'The Creation of Patriarchy in Japan: Wakita Haruko's "Women in Medieval Japan" From a Comparative Perspective', *International Journal of Asian Studies* 5, no. 1, 2008, 87–96.

domestic sphere. This essay brings forth this complex status, roles and experiences of this relatively understudied category of subordinates who had to live as the concubines of Rajput maharajas.<sup>2</sup> The chapter is based on the hitherto neglected Marwari *khyats* (court histories), *bahis* (account books) and the *chittiyas* (letters) of concubines.<sup>3</sup> The objective is to highlight the workings of a hierarchy of servitude wherein the status of concubines as socially recognised sexual partners was crucially crafted to gloss over their subordination.

## ENTERING THE ELITE HOUSE

In the fifteenth century, Rajasthan witnessed the prominence of several Rajput lineages. Through this century, the Rathor clan of Rajputs established its kingdom at Marwar with its capital at Jodhpur. By the seventeenth century, the Rathors had established their superiority over the region, and such superiority, as Ramya Sreenivasan points, was sustained through a continuous process of marking boundaries of lineage, clan and *jati* (caste).<sup>4</sup> Adoption of endogamy was an important strategy in

<sup>2</sup> Since the late twentieth century, many scholars have explored the history of women in Rajasthan. With some remarkable insights into the agency of women, the essential focus of most studies, however, revolves around Rajput queens, and in this process, concubines and other secondary groups of women have remained marginal in the existing works. This is, however, not to say that the entire range of existing studies does not bring forth any knowledge about concubines. Works of scholars such as Varsha Joshi (1995), Ramya Sreenivasan (2006) and Kiran Shekhawat (2013) unfold some important aspects of concubinage in the Marwar household. However, perhaps since these studies are also not focused on concubines, their descriptions are bound by a survey of limited sources, leaving out several important documents that provide significant insights into the lives and experiences of concubines. For the descriptions in the works of these scholars, see Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1995); Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines: Female Slaves in Rajput Polity, 1500–1850', in *Slavery & South Asian History*, eds Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 136–61; and Kiran Shekhawat, *Janani Dyodhi* (Jodhpur: Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash [hereafter MMPP], 2013).

<sup>3</sup> The dates in the *bahis* are in *Vikram Samvat* (hereafter, VS), the lunisolar Indian calendar. Fifty-seven years are deducted to arrive at these dates in the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>4</sup> Sreenivasan, 'Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines', 136–61.

this process. Alongside, women from ‘other’ or secondary communities were incorporated in the household in different service capacities as the maintenance of an elaborate and diversified janana was a crucial symbol to establish the status of the ruling lineage.

Women from secondary communities were incorporated either in direct serving ranks as *davri* (attendant) or *badaran* (senior-most attendant), who were responsible for the daily upkeep of the household, or as musical performers in one of the following categories—*nachnowali*, *talivali*, *olganiya*, *gayan*, *bhagtan*, *patar*—which were variously reserved for entertainment in private and public spaces.<sup>5</sup> These categories were deputed to serve the elite household, and many were also assigned to the service of a high ranked household member. The highest ranked in the hierarchy of ‘other’ caste women were those who were chosen by a ruler as his *pardayat* and *paswan*. These two titles denoted the conjugally oriented status of a woman akin to a concubine in Rajput society. Table 5.1 lists the recorded names of the concubines of various Rathor rulers.

TABLE 5.1: Evident Names of the Concubines of Rathor Rulers,  
c. Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries

<i>Name of Ruler<sup>6</sup></i>	<i>Names of Concubines<sup>7</sup> (pardayat and paswan)</i>
Sur Singh (1595–1618)	Harbansi Bai
Gaj Singh-I (1619–38)	Anara, Isarde, paswan Keso
Ajit Singh (1707–24)	Nainsukh, Saratrai, Gulbadan, Ajabrai, Ajabgul, paswan Shobhi
Abhai Singh (1724–49)	Paswan Gunrekha
Bakhat Singh (1751–52)	Mehtaabrai, Samajhrai, Mansukhrai

(contd)

<sup>5</sup> For details on these categories, see, D. B. Sheersagar, *Jodhpur riyasat ke darbari sangeetago ka itihās* (Jodhpur: MMPP, 1992), 1–28.

<sup>6</sup> The time period indicates the regnal year(s) of each ruler.

<sup>7</sup> Women not indicated as paswan were titled as pardayat.

(Table 5.1 continued)

Name of Ruler <sup>6</sup>	Names of Concubines <sup>7</sup> ( <i>pardayat and paswan</i> )
Vijay Singh (1752–93)	paswan Gulabrai, Chanchalrai, Navalrai, Rangruprai, Champatrai, Natasrai, Niratsukhrai, Sarasruprai, Ratanjyot, Roopji, Madanjyot, Sarasrang, Sarasrai
Bhim Singh (1793–1803)	Sambelji, Rangrai, Vakhtrai, Kusalrai, Rupras, Rangruprai, Mansukhrai
Man Singh (1803–16, 1818–43)	Chandanrai, Rangruprai, bada (elder) Champalrai, <sup>8</sup> Tulchrai, bada Saroopjot, chota (younger) Saroopjot, Diddhrai, Chappalrai, Amritrai, Sukhvaibhav, chota Champalrai, Rupjyot, Ramrai, bada Sundarra, vichla (middle) Sundarra, teeja (third) Sundarra, chota Sundarra, Paramsukhrai, Lacchrai, Pannrai, Channrai, Phulvel, Sukhsej, Mehtaabrai, Mirgijyot
Takhat Singh (1843–73)	chota Lacchrai, Jasrai, Maggrai, Kurajrai, Gangrai, Seetrai Rupjyot, Bhoor-rai, Tar-rai, Naanrai, Phulrai, Ramjyot, Prataprai, Teejai, Navrangrai, Harjanrai, Ratanjotrai, Aasrai, Jashoda
Jaswant Singh II (1873–95)	Jadavrai, chota Jadavrai, Nainibai, bada Ramrai, chota Ramrai, Bhoor-rai, Lichumanrai, Kaanrai, Mehtaabrai, Chatur-rai, Amritrai, Teer-rai bada Chanprai, chota Chanprai, Chunrai, Udairai, Paramsukhrai, Pattra, Kaanrai, Phoolrai, Phoolchailrai, Hashatrai, Anjanrai

Source: Collated from Vikram Singh Bhati, *Muraridan ki khyat*, 103; *Maharaj Shree Ajit Singh ji ki khyat*, basta no. 43, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner (RSAB), 137; Hukum Singh Bhati, *Rathoran ri khyat*, 1: 197–98 and 3: 871–72; *Bahi* no. 672; *Bahi* no. 833; *Bahi* no. 834, all three bahis accessed from Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash (MMPP).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The denomination of bada, chota, vichla and teeja were provided to differentiate between women ‘given’ the same name and resulted from their consequential initiation as a concubine.

<sup>9</sup> The complete publication details are: *Muraridan ki khyat: Marwar ke shask evam Rathor shakhao ka itihās*, translated and edited by Vikram Singh Bhati (Jodhpur: Royal Publication, 2014); Hukum Singh Bhati, ed., *Rathoran ri khyat: Jodhpur rajya ka itihās; Siha se Maharaja Man Singh (VS, 1300–1900 = AD 1243–1843)*, 3 vols (Chopasani, Jodhpur: Itihās Anusadhan Sansthan, 2007); *Maharajadhiraj Shree Takhat Singhji sahib ki salamti mein bahi*, no. 672, VS 1900–15/1843–58, in *Rasileraj: Marwar rajgharaney ki shoksambhandi paramparaye* 11, ed. Mahendra Singh Nagar (Jodhpur: MMPP, 2013); *Maharaja Ajit Singh evam Maharaja Man Singh ri bahi*, no. 833, letter 100, VS 1776/1719, MMPP; *Shadi vivah Maharaja Shree Vijay Singh se Maharaja Shree Takhat Singh tak bahi*, no. 834, letter 44, VS 1811–1917/1754–1860, MMPP. The table is, however, not an exclusive list because the names of many concubines went unrecorded and many are referred to only in ‘numbers’ in the documents.

Among the names listed in Table 5.1, many entered the Rajput home either as captures in military conquests, or as a gift and as part of royal exchanges. For example, *Muraridan ki khyat*, so far the oldest dated Marwari court chronicle, highlights that in the early seventeenth century, Harbansi Bai, one of the two recorded concubines of Sur Singh, was brought to the Rathor house in *alpavstha* (adolescence) by Sur Singh's father, Udai Singh (1583–95) from a military campaign in Lahore.<sup>10</sup> Udai Singh had also acquired one of his pardayat named Rani Bai after killing her husband, Jiwa Panwar.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, there are varied narratives about the past of Gulabrai, the most influential and perhaps the only well-known concubine from Marwar. For instance, according to *Rathoran ri khyat*, Gulabrai served as a badaran in the household of a man named Bhurat Aradram before she was gifted by the latter to the Marwari court in the late eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> *Marwar ri khyat*, alternatively, states that before her entry in the Rajput home, Gulabrai was a practising gayan (singer) who resided with a singer named Nirat Sundarji, and a *nazr* (eunuch) with the name of Arandram mediated in bringing Gulabrai to the elite house.<sup>13</sup> In a seeming effort to alienate and redefine her natal affiliation, the narration of Gulabrai's caste also oscillates between Jat and Oswal in the Rajput records.

Based on her reading of state documents, Varsha Joshi has highlighted that in elite Rajput homes, the concubines were primarily initiated from 'touchable' communities of Gujar, Ahir, Jat, Mali, Darji, Kayastha and Muslim.<sup>14</sup> That this caste ascription, whereby the ruling Rajputs and the most inferior ('untouchable') communities were promulgated as excluded from the practice of royal concubinage, was a method of asserting hierarchy in the local society is hardly difficult to fathom. Contrary to this assertion, natal alienation was a marked feature in the initiation of most concubines. Apart from captures, as pointed previously, the exchange and gifting of

<sup>10</sup> Vikram Singh Bhati, *Muraridan ki khyat*, 103. The other concubine is not named in the sources.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, *Rathoran ri khyat*, 3: 665.

<sup>13</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, ed., *Marwar ri khyat: Josi Tilokchand Kanha Singhvi Gyanmallikhayi* (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Shodh Sansthan and MMPP, 2000), 58.

<sup>14</sup> Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*, 119.

women across palaces contributed to this process. For example, in the first half of the nineteenth century, two singers, Tulchrai and Chappalrai were received in gift by the Rathor house from a ruler of Harsol (Gujarat) and were gradually initiated as the concubines of Maharaja Man Singh.<sup>15</sup>

It was rare for women to be declared as concubines immediately after entry into the household, and a prior attachment, either as an attendant or entertainer, was seen as a desirable attribute for attaining the concubine status. Time spent in the household seems to have provided occasion to test the loyalty and suitability of a woman to be selected as a conjugally oriented companion of the ruling head. This was especially because in Marwar the selection of a concubine was dependent not only on the fancy of the ruler but also on the consent of senior ranked members of the household.<sup>16</sup>

Before attaining the status of a concubine, women from 'outside' were apparently also required to be trained in the etiquettes and protocols of the elite house. In this regard, special attention was paid to train women in musical entertainment, an activity that could be performed only by non-Rajput women in the Rajput households. This training was done in the *talimkhana* (training centre) which was situated in the *janana*. While the Rajput norms did not allow women from their castes to learn the arts of dance and music, records from mid-nineteenth century highlight that the *talimkhana* was headed by a *maharani* or the chief queen of the ruler.<sup>17</sup> Apprentices at *talimkhana* comprised of females acquired in captures, as gifts and through purchases, and also the daughters of the household *davris*. One must point out here that while the evidence of purchasing of women in the documents of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is scanty, nineteenth-century Rajput *bahis* recorded frequent purchases of girls from the local community, a practice that perhaps escalated due to the reduced prospects for military conquests in this period. For example, in 1848, the Rathor house bought a 10-year-old girl from Umaid Khichi

<sup>15</sup> *Khyat Badri Bhat Sharma ri*, no. 2251, letter 47, twentieth century, MMPP, 9.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Takhat Singh's *khyat* highlights that there arose an evident friction between *Maji Sahiba* (queen mother) and Takhat Singh as the latter had initiated a female named Jashoda as his *pardayat* despite the refusal by the queen mother. Narayan Singh Bhati, ed., *Maharaja Takhat Singh ri khyat*, *Granthak* 176, first edn (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute [hereafter RORI], 1993), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Sheersagar, *Jodhpur riyasat ke darbari sangeetago*, 2.

of Pilwa (village near Jodhpur), a nine-year-old girl named Kunri from Rama Khichi of Pilwa, and a 13-year-old girl named Magni from Jeti Fatta of village Malawna (near Jodhpur).<sup>18</sup> Each of these girls was bought for 50 rupees and was admitted to the talimkhana.

At the talimkhana, females began their career as *talivali* (clappers) and *khelivali* (players) who were tasked to participate as clappers, to play light instruments and to sing in chorus during ceremonies. The women trainees were taught by male artists called *ustads*. Based on nineteenth-century records, Sheersagar has highlighted that the female trainees received a monthly allowance of 30 rupees from the state treasury.<sup>19</sup> Once a trainee or the *talimvali* acquired certain level of proficiency, she was then transferred to the *akhara*, a space reserved for skilled female entertainers in the janana.<sup>20</sup>

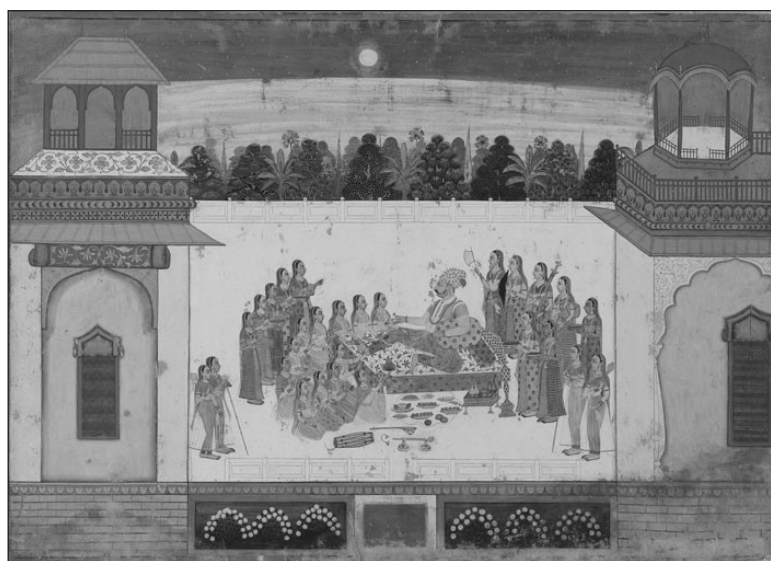


FIGURE 5.1: Maharaja Bakhat Singh Delights in an Outdoor Musical Performance.

Courtesy: Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India, and His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

Skilled entertainers were deemed as highly prized possessions in the elite house and in addition to a higher stipend than the trainees, they were also provided with material provisions like utensils, clothes and jewellery.<sup>21</sup> It appears that women who either failed to acquire perfection in musical arts or were deemed unfit for the aesthetic platform were assigned the tasks of household chores. Whether such attendants were ever chosen to become 'official concubines' is difficult to determine as available evidence suggests that the official concubines were usually procured from the group of skilled entertainers at the akhara. I use the term 'official concubine' because in the elite household, all secondary status women were deemed to be sexually available to the ruler and the 'right to choose' a concubine from women originally recruited as entertainers or drafted as maids was just one of the ways that the male heads demonstrated their patriarchal authority. However, the rulers' right to choose their concubines seems to have often promoted and reflected their desire and affection for a particular female, emotions which to an extent were devoid in elite marriages, largely premised on political alliances as they were during the period of this study.

## BECOMING A CONCUBINE

Once a ruler declared a female as his concubine, she was formally accorded with the status in an initiation ceremony. At the ceremony, every new concubine was provided with a *chura* (ivory bangles) which indicated their conjugally oriented status (*chura* being a marker of marital status in Rajasthan). To mark their distinct (and inferior) conjugality from that established with the *ranis* (queens), the names of the concubines were customarily prefixed with the title of *pardayat* or *paswan*.<sup>22</sup> These categories were hierarchically organised, where those titled as *paswan* had a superior rank. The title of *khawas* was also occasionally used in state records to

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 8. Sheersagar also highlights that in the reign of Takhat Singh (1843–73), the monthly stipend of the *gayans* was 125 rupees.

<sup>22</sup> For the etymology of these words, see Priyanka Khanna, 'The Female Companion in a World of Men: Friendship and Concubinage in Late Eighteenth-Century Marwar', *Studies in History* 33, no. 1, 2017, 101.



denote a concubine. As additional indicators to their secondary conjugal status, the names given to concubines were also symbolic markers of their distinction from the *ranis* as the latter always retained their natal names after marriage. The prefix of Bhattiyani, for instance, was maintained by the queens from the Rajput house of Jaiselmer.<sup>23</sup> Inversely, concubines were provided new names which were usually aesthetic in nature and denoted their bodily trait or physical attribute. Examples include Sundar (beautiful), Phool (flower), Chatur (intelligent) and Anjan (beautiful eyes) (see Table 5.1). Concubines were, however, devoid of a surname and as a replacement, honorific titles such as Rai, Bai and Sukh were attached to their names to command respect, owing to their intimacy with the ruler. Strikingly, the names of the attendants and public performers were often kept ordinary and unassuming. For example, Kisni, Nathi, Panuri and Akhuri were names of some of the public entertainers (*patars* and *bhagtans*) of Bhim Singh.<sup>24</sup> Such system of naming was primarily aimed at appropriating the identity of women from 'other' communities by delinking them from their natal kin lineage. The distinct re-naming process also contributed to a hierarchical classification of females in the household. Such ordering of female categories being both an imitation of and an effort at preserving the formal hierarchy at court since status differences formed a base for the sustenance of the stratified elite households in the past.

The position of concubines as distinct and superior from other female serving groups was further established by allowing them certain other privileges. For example, while depending upon their rank, all the other female working groups were provided residential space within either the *talimkhana*, *akhara* or other common halls of the *janana*, the concubines received an independent quarter in the *janana*. Moreover, while the concubines were granted the right to wear ornaments made entirely of emerald (*panna*), diamond (*hira*) and gold (*sona*), the ornaments of artists and attendants could only partly be made of gold and were mixed with either silver or other inferior stones.<sup>25</sup> As a marker of her elevated status,

<sup>23</sup> For prefixes of queens from other Rajput households, see Mahendra Singh Nagar, ed., *Ranimanga Bhaton ki bahi* (Jodhpur: MMPP, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Sheersagar, *Jodhpur riyasat ke darbari sangeetago*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Ajitvilas, ed. Shiv Duttdan Barhat, *Granthak* 155, in *Rajasthan Puratan Granthmala*, ed. Padamdhar Pathak (Jodhpur: RORI, 1984), 202. This was a general

a concubine was also allowed to wear gold anklets, a symbol of royalty in court circles.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, for their subsistence (*hath kharach*), concubines, like the ranis, were granted *jagirs* (landed estates). Although the lands received by concubines were mostly inferior to the jagirs of the queens, the intimacy with the ruler brought for certain concubines more than the usual prerogatives for their group.<sup>27</sup> For example, in the late eighteenth century, paswan Gulabrai received an entire *pargana* (territorial unit comprising a group of villages) of Jalor as her jagir from Vijay Singh.<sup>28</sup>

The concubines, as the queens, were, however, only temporary landowners as the ultimate ownership of land was retained by ruling men who deprived women from the right to transfer their estate. After the death of a female *jagirdar* (holder of an estate), her land thus reverted as the property of the state. During their lifetime, however, the right to land revenues brought for these women some degree of economic independence. With this entitlement, concubines also earned the right to maintain a small clique of attendants. For example, Mirki, Chetki and Jetki attended as personal *davris* to pardayat Pannrai while Rupa and Kisturi served pardayat Paramsukhrail.<sup>29</sup>

Tied in a new relationship of service, concubines donned the role of an employer when they hired, supervised and paid their employees from the earnings of their jagirs. Bahis of pardayat Pannrai, for instance, reveal that after receiving the jagir of *Mathani*, she appointed a *kanwaria* (farmer) at three rupees per month and Muhta Lalchand as the *hawaldar* (police official) with a salary fixed at five rupees per month.<sup>30</sup> Other staff members

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norm though intimacy with the ruler often led women to receive privileges that superseded such prescriptions.

<sup>26</sup> Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> For a comparison of the landed estates of concubines vis-à-vis the queens, see Priyanka Khanna, 'Half-Wed Wives: A Study of Concubines in the Rajasthani Kingdom of Marwar, c. 17th–Mid 19th Centuries' (Ph.D. diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2016), 55–62.

<sup>28</sup> Munhta Nainsi, *Marwar ra Pargana ri Vigat*, ed. N. S. Bhati Singh, vol. 2 (Jodhpur: RORI, 1969), 416.

<sup>29</sup> See *Maharaja Shree Man Singhji ke pardayat Pannraiiji taluke jama kharach ri sawa bahi*, no. 18, letter 109, VS 1891–93/1834–36, MMPP, and *Maharaja Man Singh sahib ke pardayatiji Shree Paramsukhrailiji bahi*, no. 105, letter 177, VS 1907/1850, MMPP.

<sup>30</sup> See the section on *kharach* (expense) in the first month account in *Bahi* no. 18, MMPP.

regularly appointed for the management of women's estates included a *patwari* (accountant), *karkun* (clerk) and a *darogha* (inspector). Gulabrai, with an elaborate jagir, also maintained a *diwan* (finance minister) and a *musahib* (advisor) as chiefs of her jagir government.<sup>31</sup>

At home, personal *davri*(s) were allotted to the concubines by the state, most likely at the time of their initiation. Evidently, some concubines, perhaps at a later stage, also voiced their preference for a certain attendant or an additional help which was conveyed through *arzi* (request notes)



FIGURE 5.2: Maharaja Jaswant Singh II with Paswan Naini (seated) and a *Davri*.

The portrait exemplifies the 'relatively elevated' position as a concubine of Naini vis-à-vis the standing attendant.

*Courtesy:* Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India, and His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur.

<sup>31</sup> For details, see Narayan Singh Bhati, ed., *Maharaja Man Singhji ri khyat, Granthak* 133, 2nd edn (Jodhpur: RORI, 1997), 18–21.

to their master.<sup>32</sup> The household staff of concubines took care of their everyday chores of cooking, cleaning and washing. Like their landed staff, the *davris* of concubines were employed on a monthly stipend. Account books from the nineteenth century suggest that the salary of a concubine's *davri* was fixed at six rupees per month.<sup>33</sup>

The practice of gifting was also a significant element of the service relationship shared by the concubines with their subordinates. For example, a *bahi* of *pardayat* Jasrai reveals that in July 1864, the concubine spent eight rupees and fifteen paise on a pair of *jootiya* (footwear) ordered especially from Merta for her *davri* Kesar.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in 1776, Gulabrai had sent a *Jaipuri poshak* (traditional Rajput dress) for the newly wed wife of one of her staff members named Pawar Narsinghdas.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, participation in the life-cycle rituals of their staff seems to have been a regular feature. *Pardayat* Kannrai, for instance, presented a *nichrawal* (monetary gift) of two rupees to the *patwari* of her estate of Jetaran, on his daughter's wedding.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, on the death of her *davri* Lali, *pardayat* Lacchrai (Takhat Singh's concubine) undertook the responsibility of sending *kadvi khichdi* to Lali's children.<sup>37</sup> The ritual of sending *kadvi khichdi* or food comprising cooked rice and lentil to the household of a deceased was an important part of the death ceremonies in the region. While donations and gifting were common elements in patron-client relationships, perhaps a consciousness of their erstwhile subordination also contributed to the evident empathy in the relationship shared by the concubines as masters to their servants.<sup>38</sup> These regular endowments

<sup>32</sup> For example, see the *arzi* of *pardayat* Chunrai appended in *Janana deorhi bahi*, no. 4, letter 17, VS 1818/1761, MMPP.

<sup>33</sup> For examples, see sections on *kharach* in *Bahi* no. 18, letter 109, and *Bahi* no. 105, letter 177.

<sup>34</sup> *Maharaj Shri Takhat Singhji Sahib ki pardayat Shri Jasrai sarkar ri bahi*, no. 1676, letter 132, VS 1921/1864, MMPP.

<sup>35</sup> *Jodhpur haqiqat bahi*, no. 3, VS 1835–40/1778–83, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner (hereafter, RSAB), 174.

<sup>36</sup> *Maharaja Shree Mansinghji Sahib ke pardayatji Kannrai taluke jama kharach bahi*, no. 15, letter 148, VS 1884/1827, MMPP.

<sup>37</sup> *Rasileraj*, 11: 35.

<sup>38</sup> For the emergence of patron-client relationships in seventeenth-century Rajasthan, see Norman P. Ziegler, 'Rajput Loyalties during the Mughal Period', in

also cannot be discounted as a symbolic effort, for it equally functioned to announce the distinction of the concubines from other subordinates, as from their former subordinate status.

The configuration of relative superiority and power exercised by the concubines did not, however, completely mitigate their own subordinate status. In fact, rulers claimed unrestrained sexual access from their concubines, tying them to their establishment and denying them any possibility of acquiring conjugal rights of marriage. Attached to this was the ordained subordinate position of their progeny, as unlike many other elite societies, the Rajputs disenfranchised the son of a concubine from the right to rule.<sup>39</sup> This disenfranchisement policy seems to have actually allowed for the distribution of relative authority with concubines, as the deprivation from the supreme prerogative inadvertently established a perpetuity of dependence in concubines and their progeny and they were thus deployed to serve the state in distinct ways.

## BORN TO SERVE! PROGENY OF CONCUBINES

Besides demarcating the claims to throne, the Rajput households maintained other distinctions between the progeny of a concubine and of a queen. While the sons of queens were addressed as *kunwar* and *yuvraj*, connoting a 'prince', the sons born to concubines were addressed by titles of *bhabha*, *lal* and *keekah*, all three denoting 'boy' in Rajasthani.<sup>40</sup> The bhabhas were often included in the Rajput army and by virtue of their natal relationship with the elite home, very often they were also entrusted with

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*Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. John F. Richards (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 242–84.

<sup>39</sup> For example, among the Ottomans, from the sixteenth century onwards, it was an established custom for sons of concubines to carry the legacy of the Empire. In the Mughal household, sons of concubines held an equal right as sons of queens to rule the kingdom. The elite households in China also provided possibilities for the sons of concubines to succeed their father. For detailed discussions, see Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*; Bano, 'Marriage and Concubinage'; Zhao, 'Concubinage in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature'.

<sup>40</sup> Marwari bahis suggest that the daughters born to concubines and queens were addressed as *baiji*, and to mark their distinction, the names of their mothers were attached with them.

administrative posts within the household. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, for example, Vijay Singh employed bhabha Khejnidhar as the *potedar* (finance officer) of all the workshops (*karkhana*) in the fort palace, bhabha Devkisan as a darogha (inspector) of *kamthorakothar* or the department of construction works, bhabha Kisan as *waqianavis* (news reporter) and bhabha Nago as the *sarraf* (money changer) at the Rathor fort.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, bhabhas were often designated to serve on strategic posts outside the fort premises. For instance, Moti Singh, son of Takhat Singh's pardayat Lacchrai, held the post of *waqianavis* in the administrative quarter of Nagaur during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

In return for their services, these sons were granted *patta* (deed) of one or more landed estates. The lands granted to bhabhas, like those to their mothers, were free from feudal obligations and dues. Their pattas were non-transferable and could not be alienated by sale or gift. But, unlike the lands of their mothers, the jagirs of the sons were transmissible and could devolve on the natural or adopted male descendants of the original grantee. Adoptions could, however, be resorted to only with the descendants of concubines within the house, which was yet another strategy to freeze social boundaries.

Clearly with the same intent, Rajputs also restricted the marriages of concubines' progeny to members of their same status group. For the state, these endogamous marriages, like that of the royal progeny, served as a strategy to establish networks and political alliances. For example, in the late eighteenth century, a friendly political alliance against the warring Marathas was established by Rathor ruler Vijay Singh with the Kacchwahas (Jaipur house) by way of contracting the marriage of Tej Singh, his son with paswan Gulabrai, with the daughter of a concubine of Madho Singh, the ruler of Jaipur.<sup>43</sup> Two such significant marriage contracts from the nineteenth century include that of bhabha Bhabhut Singh (son of pardayat chota Rupjyot and Man Singh) who was married

<sup>41</sup> *Ohda bahi: Jodhpur*, no. 1, VS 1765–1941/1708–1884, RSAB.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>43</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, *Marwar ri khyat*, 77; Hukum Singh Bhati, *Rathoran ri khyat*, 3: 665. Madho Singh I died in 1768, and therefore the marriage of his concubine's daughter was contracted by his younger son and second successor, Maharaja Pratap Singh (1778–1803).

to the daughter of a paswan of Rao Raja Lakshman Singh, the ruler of the Sikar *thikana* (estate), and that of Sirdar Singh (elder son of paswan Maggrai and Takhat Singh) who was married to a concubine's daughter in the ruling house of Bundi.<sup>44</sup> In these weddings, clothes, jewellery and cash were customarily exchanged between the elite houses, and evidence shows that in certain weddings, such as that of Bhabhut Singh, numerous horses and elephants also formed a part of the dowry (*dayjo*) received by the house of Marwar from the Rajput chief of Sikar.<sup>45</sup> Such matrimonial alliances also facilitated long-term exchanges and association between elite houses. For instance, at the wedding of Madan Singh, who was the son of bhabha Bhabhut Singh, several gifts were received by the Marwar house from Sikar in the ceremony of *mayra* or the ritual of presenting gifts to the family of groom from the household of maternal uncle. Gifts in this *mayra* included elephants and horses (a total of four), bangles (*karha*), pearls (*moti*), pearl necklace (*motiyari kanthi*), head ornament (*sirpech*), embroidered and fine quality stoles and 350 dresses for females.<sup>46</sup> How much, or if any, of this was received by the descendants of the concubine is an issue that remains unresolved in the sources.

Deployed in a similar fashion, the daughters of the concubines were married to other ruling houses and also to secondary Rajput clans.<sup>47</sup> In the latter form of marriage contracts, the groom was usually retained for state service. In 1755, for instance, Vijay Singh contracted the marriage of his half-sister Mani Bai—daughter of his father Bakhat Singh with a khawas—to Bhawani Singh Fatehsinghot of Village Shetesar.<sup>48</sup> As part of this marriage, Bhawani Singh was incorporated in the state service with a patta of 10,000 rupees. Similarly, the marriage of Sada Kanwar—the daughter of

<sup>44</sup> See *Maharaja Shree Man Singhji sahib ke bhabhashree Bhabhut Singhji bahi*, no. 428, letter 66, VS 1892/1835, MMPP, and Narayan Singh Bhati, *Maharaja Takhat Singh ri khyat*, 394.

<sup>45</sup> *Bahi* no. 428, letter 66, VS 1892/1835, MMPP.

<sup>46</sup> Narayan Singh Bhati, *Maharaja Takhat Singh ri khyat*, 102.

<sup>47</sup> Rathors were the ruling Rajput clan of Marwar whereas several other branches of Rajputs also lived in Marwar, as in other states of Rajasthan. For details, see Hardayal Singh, *The Castes of Marwar: Census Report of 1891*, 2nd edn (Jodhpur: Books Treasure, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, *Rathoran ri khyat*, 3: 540. Bakhat Singh could rule only for one year (1751–52) as a sudden stroke of fever led to his death at the age of 46 years.

Man Singh and pardayat Rangruprai—was arranged by Takhat Singh with Bhati Mukan Singh of village Banasar (Phalodi), and in exchange, the latter entered state service by acquiring pattas of villages Kagal and Jajiwai.<sup>49</sup>

By facilitating the expansion of political ties, children borne out of concubines could be perceived as an important rationale for the institution. The number of children also indicated the sexual strength of the ruler. Moreover, in the courtly setting, where power was supreme and intrigues were rampant, concubines' progeny stood as a reliable source for managing the household from within and outside, and the rulers often turned to them for support. For example, the early nineteenth century records reveal that Man Singh, along with his religious associates from the Nath cult, always took refuge with the bhabhas to escape the opposition of the court circle to his generosity for the Nathas.<sup>50</sup> It was perhaps for such services that many a times a serving female gained the position of a concubine only after giving birth to a ruler's child. For example, as per evidence, Vijay Singh's concubine Gulabrai gave birth to her only son Tej in 1767, a year after she entered the Rathor house, and was still serving as a gayan at the time as she was declared the ruler's paswan only in 1774.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in the reign of Takhat Singh (1843–73), entertainers such as Rupjyot, Naanrai and chota Lacchrai were conferred with the status of a concubine only after they had given birth.<sup>52</sup> In cases where a subordinate was not declared as a concubine,

<sup>49</sup> Narayan Singh Bhati, *Maharaja Takhat Singh ri khyat*, 70.

<sup>50</sup> For Man Singh's association with the Nathas, see Daniel Gold, 'The Instability of the King: Magical Insanity and the Yogi's Power in the Politics of Jodhpur, 1803–1843', in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, ed. David N. Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 120–32. For role of bhabhas in his reign, see *Maharaja Man Singhji ri khyat*, especially 160–62. For discussion on the reliability of slaves and their progeny among the elites, see Sunil Kumar, 'Service, Status, and Military Slavery in the Delhi Sultanate: Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', in *Slavery & South Asian History*, 83–114.

<sup>51</sup> For details on Gulabrai and her intimacy with Vijay Singh, see Khanna, 'The Female Companion', 98–116.

<sup>52</sup> Rupjyot's daughter was born in 1855, Naanrai gave birth to her son in 1856, while chota Lachhrai's son was born in 1860, and all these three women were initiated as Takhat Singh's pardayat in 1862. See *Maharaja Shree Vijay Singhji ki salamti se lekar Maharaja Shree Takhat Singhji ki salamti tak bahi*, no. 836, VS 1823–1929/1766–1872, MMPP, 78 and 80.



their children were often used for other kinds of transactions. For example, in 1767, apart from Gulabrai, another singer named Rangrasrai gave birth to a son in the Rathor house. But while Gulabrai went on to gain the status of the ruler's concubine, Rangrasrai was never provided with this status and instead her son was given in adoption to a courtier named Abdar Sahibkhanji.<sup>53</sup> Once declared as a concubine, their institutionalised status disallowed the transaction of their progeny in adoption and as bonded labour in the form of human dowry or as direct gifts, which was often the fate of the children of other subordinates.

## EVERYDAY ROLES AND AGENCY OF CONCUBINES

In the royal courts, almost all relationships were marked by hierarchy and were tied by elements of monetary exchanges and/or affective demands. The master–concubine dyad was formed by both these factors. Each concubine received a monetary allowance and being the chosen ones, many shared a close relationship with the ruler. The chronicles of Rathors, much to their wrath, name several concubines who shared an intimate relationship with their respective rulers.<sup>54</sup> The additional prerogatives of many such concubines and some of the structures sponsored for them by their patrons are important indicators of the rulers' proximity with their concubines.<sup>55</sup>

It was perhaps the element of choice and intimacy in concubinage that rulers often entrusted a concubine with the duty of fostering one or more of their kunwars. Udai Singh, for instance, had assigned his pardayat Harbola as the guardian of kunwar Sur Singh, who later went on to succeed his father.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Sur Singh had also announced Harbansi Bai as the

<sup>53</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, *Marwar ri khyat*, 66.

<sup>54</sup> Examples include: Gaj Singh and Anara, Vijay Singh and Gulabrai, Man Singh and Rangruprai, Takhat Singh and Lacchrai, Jaswant Singh II and Nainibai, to name a few.

<sup>55</sup> Rangruprai, for instance, was conferred with a personal elephant by Man Singh. Narayan Singh Bhati, *Maharaja Takhat Singh ri khyat*, 72. Naini was honoured with a temple built for her by Jaswant Singh II. Chetan Chouhan, 'Sthapatya Kala ki Bejor Kriti: Nainibai Mandir', *Rajasthan Patrika* (Jodhpur Circle, 11 April 1996), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Vikram Singh Bhati, *Muraridan ki khyat*, 97.

caretaker of Gaj Singh, his eldest son with his rani Sobhagde.<sup>57</sup> In fact, a Rajput court chronicle justifies the capture of Harbansi Bai from Lahore to meet the need of a caretaker for the young prince.<sup>58</sup> In the late eighteenth century, Vijay Singh's son Sher Singh and his grandson Man Singh were also raised under the guardianship of Vijay Singh's paswan Gulabrai.<sup>59</sup> Fosterage usually led to affective ties between a concubine and the prince; some of the structures built in the memory of concubines by their fostered princes in Jodhpur stand as legacies of the same.<sup>60</sup>

Their routine engagement with the elite domesticity is further evident from the bahis of concubines which reveal that a major portion of their landed earnings was spent on the social and religious activities of the elite house. Depending upon their financial status, while some concubines took upon the task of organising festivities, each concubine customarily contributed nichrawal on every life-cycle occasion—from birth, marriage and death of different members to festivities and related celebrations—within the house.<sup>61</sup> Philanthropic activities also occupied a significant part of the everyday lives of concubines and most of them, like the other aristocratic women in janana, habitually contributed a

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> See Hukum Singh Bhati, *Marwar ri khyat*, 82, and Hukum Singh Bhati, *Rathoran ri khyat*, 3: 689. Sher Singh was formally adopted (*kholebaithe*) by Gulabrai on the insistence of Vijay Singh. For reactions and subsequent events to this adoption, see Khanna, 'The Female Companion'.

<sup>60</sup> For example, after the death of Harbola, Sur Singh sponsored a step-well (*bavdi*) in her memory in Jodhpur. Vikram Singh Bhati, *Muraridan ki khyat*, 97. Similarly, according to one belief, the Anasagar Lake in Jodhpur was sponsored by Jaswant Singh I (1638–78) in gratitude for his mother-like Anara, who is said to have proposed Jaswant's name for the throne. The other belief about the lake is that it was sponsored by Gaj Singh for his beloved concubine. Y. D. Singh, *Rajasthan ki jhilen aur talaben: Jodhpur ke sandarbh mein* (Jodhpur: MMPP, 2002), 137–38. For more instances of 'fosterage' by women of lower status (ayahs) in a different household (Anglo-Indian households), see the chapters by Satyasikha Chakraborty 'From *Bibis* to *Ayahs*: Sexual Labour, Domestic Labour and the Moral Politics of Empire', and Nitin Varma, 'The Many Lives of *Ayah*: Life Trajectories of Female Servants in Early Nineteenth-Century India', in *Servants' Pasts: Late Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia*, eds Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019) [forthcoming].

<sup>61</sup> For examples, see Khanna, 'Half-Wed Wives', especially 92–97.

share of their earnings to spiritual places and practitioners of religion. For example, account books of *pardayat* *Paramsukhras* reveal that she customarily dispensed a monthly sum for the upkeep of Balkrishan temple in Jodhpur.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in 1830, *bada Channrai's* *bahi* recorded a total amount of 163 rupees that were spent on the yearly food supply to a *brahmani* (female priest).<sup>63</sup>

One of the other prolific socio-religious actions performed by several concubines in Marwar was to undertake pilgrimage journeys. Gulabrai, for instance, undertook three prominent pilgrimages during her lifetime, first in 1773 to Haridwar (north India), second in 1778 to Dwarkaji in Gujarat (western India), and the last one in 1779 to Muthreshji Temple in Jaipur (Rajasthan, north-west India).<sup>64</sup> As evident in their *bahis*, concubines such as Channrai, Pannrai, *Paramsukhras* and Jasrai had also undertaken pilgrim voyages to Haridwar. In such journeys, concubines were customarily accompanied by their *davri(s)* and a *deorhidar* (guard) of the *janana*. Influential concubines such as Gulabrai were followed by a clique of *sardars* (nobles) as well.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere, I have elaborated on how such journeys facilitated the concubines to form associations with courtly members.<sup>66</sup> That being incidental, pilgrim journeys were foremost a medium to display their religious leanings, to the public as well as to their master. Ruby Lal, in her study on Mughal women, argued that the Hajj or the spiritual journey of imperial women was supported by the Mughal state because it fostered an Islamic image of the Mughal Empire.<sup>67</sup> In a similar vein, the Rajput state supported the pilgrimages of concubines because they

<sup>62</sup> For example, see her monthly expense in *Maharaja Shri Mansinghji ke pardayat Paramsukhrasji bahi*, no. 52, letter 330, VS 1899–1900/1842–43, MMPP.

<sup>63</sup> *Maharaja Shree Mansingh ji sahib ke pardayatji Shree bada Channraiji sarkar taluke jamakharach bahi*, no. 251, letter 242, VS 1887–89/1830–32, MMPP. The *jins* (food items) sent by *bada Channrai*, for instance, comprised of *ghee* (clarified butter), *aata* (flour), *daal* (pulses), *dahi* (yoghurt), *saag* (leafy vegetables) and *sanghara* (a fruit consumed especially during fasting).

<sup>64</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, *Marwar ri khyat*, 69 and 79; Hukum Singh Bhati, *Rathoran ri khyat*, 3: 599.

<sup>65</sup> Hukum Singh Bhati, *Marwar ri khyat*, 69.

<sup>66</sup> Khanna, 'The Female Companion'.

<sup>67</sup> Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

were representations of a religiously inclined ruling house. Therefore, as much as expressing the agency of these women, these quotidian activities of concubines were essential for the sustenance of the royal cultural sphere. And although such actions might not easily fit in our modern notions of service, they were crucial in the formation of elite households of the period. That is why there was a defined demarcation between other subordinates and the concubines, with the latter being reserved for such unclassified and relatively superior forms of assistance to the king and his household.

## LETTERS TO THE MASTER

Fortunately, there is a surviving, though so far unexamined, corpus of letters written by concubines to their rulers from Jodhpur.<sup>68</sup> These letters, as most other letters by women of the Rathor house, date from mid-eighteenth century onwards. The history and trajectory of paper reaching this region suggests that prior to the eighteenth century, paper might not have been easily accessible to women and other economically dependent social groups.<sup>69</sup> In the earlier period, as highlighted by Varsha Joshi, women in the elite homes used slates to convey their concerns as slates were reusable and thus cost-effective.<sup>70</sup> With availability of paper, women found a relatively larger and private space for self-representation and to voice their concerns. This privilege, however, remained unaffordable for groups ranked lower in the service hierarchy. To voice their concerns, the lower subordinates primarily resorted to raising petition (*arzi*) that was precise and lacked the intimacy which was associated with a letter. The coarse paper of the concubines' letters vis-à-vis the glossy ones employed by the queens is conversely reflective of their subordinate status in relation to the latter group.

Concubines composed letters individually as well as collectively with other concubines of their master. Their extant letters are in classical

<sup>68</sup> *Janani chittiya: Jodhpur dastri record*, File no. 105, RSAB. All letters referred to in this chapter have been accessed from this file. Individual letters are not catalogued or numbered yet.

<sup>69</sup> I discuss this issue in detail in my essay, 'Some Dimensions of the "Early Modern" in Rajasthan c.1700–1850', presented at the conference, 'Debating the "Early Modern" in South Asian History', Ashoka University, Sonipat, 10 February 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*, 130.

Marwari language with a mix of Hindi, Persian and Sanskrit words. The handwriting differs in every letter. Some, particularly those with scratches and crossed-out words, appear to have been penned by the women themselves who received elementary education in these households. The other, relatively polished, letters were seemingly prepared with the help of professional scribes (*charan*). Some letters mention the day and date, but none of them state the year. A plausible reason for that is the nature of these letters which appear to be spontaneous responses to situations rather than long-drawn leisured compositions.

Each of the concubines' letters follows a tripartite division: beginning with salutation and eulogies for the ruler, followed by subject matter and concluding with customarily apology for any mistake in the letter composition. Eulogies occupy the largest space in majority of the available letters. Alike in most letters, the adulations attempt to assert a shared pride in the reputation of their ruler and in doing that, attempt to forge an intimacy with the master and reflect the social aspirations of concubines.

In each letter, the ruler is addressed as हजूर/*hajoor* (master), सायब/*sayab* (master), खाँवनद/*khaawnd* (master) and sometimes as फूटरमल/*footarmal* (husband). To introduce their 'self', concubines always mentioned their names but significantly chose to replace the official prefix of *pardayat/paswan* with that of *khanazad*. The term *khanazad* signified a house-born servant and was apparently adopted in the Marwari lexicon from Mughal influence. By choosing to represent their 'self' as *khanazads*, concubines seemingly attempted to emphasise their loyalty and belonging to the elite house, and perhaps also wished to shift focus from their secondary conjugal status.

Here one must also consider the public nature of letter circulation in the Rajput house, for even though there is no clear evidence as to how these letters were sent (and read), the closest possibility is that the Davris transmitted the letters of their masters to the ultimate master or the ruler. Whether these letters were ever read by or to the ruler can only be assumed as there are no available responses from any ruler. The preservation of these letters in official files, however, indicates that they did reach the state authority. But in this whole epistolary culture of transmitting, lettering by scribes and, not to forget, shared lettering of concubines, letters were quite possibly circulated beyond the intended addressee. Therefore, the

idea of private letters seems moot and images of ‘self’ were naturally constructed with the editorial awareness of their public or open nature. In this scenario, the emphasis on belonging and allegiance to the house in these letters assumes further importance.

A range of other terms were also employed by the concubines to lay stress on their devotion towards their masters. Some of the recurrent terms include चकर/*chakar* (servant), दासी/*dasi* (female servant), चरणा री खैवरी/*charana ri khaivri* (servant of the feet) and चरणा री रंज/*charana ri ranj* (dust of feet). This self-relegation, a common occurrence in voices of the subordinates, performs to portray a complete submission to the master, thereby resonating women’s consciousness to preserve royal patronage. The reference to their ‘self’ as *chakar* is particularly symbolic in the Rajput context where *chakari* indicated service, dedication and loyalty to the *dhani* (overlord) in lieu of return.<sup>71</sup> Seen in this context, the allocation of jagirs, jewellery and other prerogatives to concubines falls into a bureaucratised space where relations of affect converged with service. These overlapping emotions manifested in concubinage perhaps explain the degree of comfort in the subject matter of the otherwise structured letters of concubines.

In the subject, the letters convey to the master the concerns, experiences and personal anxieties of concubines. Amongst the extant letters, majority are concerned with monetary negotiation. For example, in a short letter by Rupjyot, where she referred to herself as *pava ri chappda vali pardayat* that translates as ‘concubine who gives massage on feet’, she expressed to Man Singh:

Master, today I received fifteen hundred rupees as my share from the sale of crops in village Sonagra, but with this amount I am unable to meet my expenses...

Others have complete [*sabut*] villages, so they can subsist on the earnings from crops, otherwise master, you are also aware that the earnings from the crop are usually not even enough to buy millets, forget about any precious items.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> For details on *chakari*, see G. D. Sharma, *Rajput Polity—A Study of Politics and Administration of the State of Marwar 1638–1749* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1977).

<sup>72</sup> All translations from Marwari are mine. See Figure 5.3 for a copy of the original letter. I have deduced the name of this concubine by corroborating information from archival records that highlight that village Sonagra was granted by Man Singh to Rupjyot.

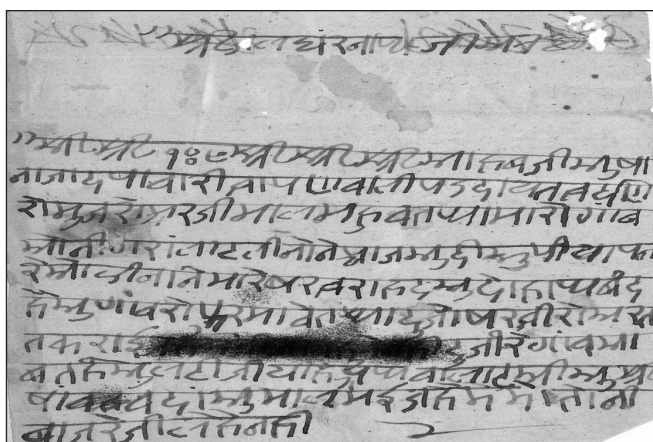


FIGURE 5.3: Copy of the Original Note by Rupjyot to Man Singh.

Source: Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

Depending on their relationship with the ruler, many concubines received only a specified revenue share in a village rather than an entire estate, which seems to be the cause of worry with Rupjyot. Her note is particularly striking because it is the only one where a pardayat does not introduce her 'self' by name and prefers to remind the ruler about her personal service (massage) before requesting for an enhancement in her resources.

Mentioning low finances as a hurdle in fulfilling their landed responsibilities was another form of negotiation employed by many women in their letters. For example, the primary issue in the letter by Kannrai reads as follows:

Dear Lord, if you find it suitable, then please increase my stipend [hath kharach] as the earnings from my village are low [and] due to that I am unable to pay the wages of workers [kamino] and of Kamal Das.<sup>73</sup>

Putting forth requests in this way was a clever method as the landed estates of women were ultimately owned by the state and by pointing out

<sup>73</sup> I did not find any information about this person in the sources used for this study.

its management cost, women also highlighted their contribution to the state system. Concern for their finances dominated even the composition of 'collective' missives prepared by two or more concubines. In one such joint letter, concubines named Sundarrai, Mehtaabrai, Paramsukhrai and Pannrai requested their ruler (Man Singh) for monetary help to meet their monthly expenses as the income from their respective villages was dwindling. Such collective requests appear to have been aimed to induce greater attention towards their needs. Sharing a letter would have also saved costs on paper, ink and the fee of a scribe.

It was, however, not just material anxieties that tied women in a textual body. Mutually felt desires and longing to be with their partner also promoted joint writing endeavours. The primary subject in one amongst many such letters, composed by Man Singh's five concubines, namely bada Sundarrai, vichla Sundarrai, chota Sundarrai, Pannrai and Paramsukhrai, reads as follows:

Dear Master, please visit us once and we will consider our destiny enlightened.  
You are our moon, show us your face and give us happiness.  
Beloved you are intelligent, you know all the traditions.

Such accounts of emotional expression particularly stand out for bringing forth the overlap between sentiments and societal structures. Evident in this and several other letters is an obvious structuring of personal feelings which were mostly restrained or else shrouded in the trope of love poetry. The expression of personal emotions, in fact, seems to have largely remained a social act in the elite home. Unified expression of affect further problematises the understanding of such expressions as real or felt, individual experiences. However, such shared 'personal' letters do suggest that women with common status, desires and worries networked not just as a social group but also, as Barbara Rosenwein would describe them, an 'emotional community'.<sup>74</sup> Polygynous family structures were then as much capable of giving rise to female collaborations as they were to competitions.

<sup>74</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 2006). Rosenwein coined the term 'emotional communities' to describe social groups whose members adhere to the same valuations of emotions and their expression.



Significantly, some episodes of female frictions are also evident in the letters of concubines. Going by the details in such letters, they appear to be reports of the day-to-day happenings in the janana. For a case in point, there are several letters by pardayat Mirgijot that describe the intra-janana activities to Man Singh. In one of her longest letters, she elaborately describes an ongoing tension amongst the women inmates to acquire desired rooms in the janana. An excerpt from this letter reads as follows:

Accept greetings from your loyal servant [*khanazad*] Mirgijot.

Queen Mother [*majisa*] had called the four women in the musical gathering hall [*akhara*] of Bhim Singh.

I got to know that pardayat Pannrai asked pardayat Paramsukh to vacate the upper floor, stating that she had no use of the window but Paramsukh told Pannrai that she [Paramsukh] has children and her [Pannrai's] respect was in staying on the ground floor and Paramsukh tore the papers.

Pardayatji, Sundarraiji, Mehtaabraiji, Pannraiji have been discussing this matter for past three–four days but Pannraiji, Paramsukhraiji and all the four women have not been able to resolve the matter.

In the same letter, Mirgijot also reports to the ruler that the queen mother called pardayat Sambel and told the latter to keep the patars in the long corridor outside her room (*saal*). The letter also informs about the everyday activities of other janana inmates such as: pardayat Channrai, pardayat Sundarraai along with rani Devri *teeja* (third) visited the house of Govinda (no information) on a festive occasion; several vegetables (*tarkariya*) came along with the jagir earning (*jama*) of chota Phulvel; and the latter along with Channrai and Sundarraai made religious donations which included lentils (*daal*), rice (*chawal*) and sweet rice milk (*kheer*) among other food items (*jins*). Such in-house information in the letters of concubines brings to life intra-janana experiences, much of which has long been mostly conjectured. These interesting testimonies of domestic affairs also clearly reveal the janana as a dynamic site embroiled with hierarchy, contestations and alliances. They unveil the everyday struggles of women, specifically the secondary ranked, for space and status in the house, while clearly highlighting the agency of concubines in the quotidian affairs of the household. Such letters also suggest that some concubines might have performed the role of janana spies. But it is difficult to determine whether concubines such as Mirgijot were designated to transmit such

information to the ruler or if women shared janana happenings, as gossip and surrounding experience, with their male partner out of their own willingness. In any case, such messages clearly represent their sender as devoted to the recipient and through such transmissions, women perhaps strove to bolster their own position and intimacy with their ruler.

## STATUS AND SEGREGATION AFTER DEATH

Despite their relatively elevated status, active involvement and efforts to strengthen their position, after death the concubines were treated like other subordinates of the elite home. Till the mid-nineteenth century, most concubines, like the queens and other janana inmates, undertook self-immolation upon the death of their ruler. The self-immolation by women has been variously interpreted by scholars. According to one viewpoint, it was a representative symbol of the ultimate loyalty and affiliation of women towards their ruler/partner, while another perception sees the act as a deliberate alternative taken up by women to avoid a dismal future without their master.<sup>75</sup> Despite either of these intents, the self-immolation by concubines could never achieve the revered status that was accorded to the self-immolation by queens in the Rajput society. This is most apparent by the difference in terminology used for the same act when undertaken by different groups of women. In the Rajput chronicles and society, self-immolation by queens, for instance, was always described as an act of *sati* (literally meaning, righteous) while the self-immolation by other female (and male) subordinates was attested as *beli* (literally, to burn oneself). Strikingly, the self-immolation by concubines is addressed in sources by both terms—*sati* and *beli*—a seeming result of conflating the dual status of concubines as ‘like-wife and the server’ of their ruler. A concubine was,

<sup>75</sup> For details, see Norman Ziegler, ‘Action, Power, and Service in Rajasthani Culture: A Social History of the Rajputs of Middle Period Rajasthan’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1973); Dorothy Stein, ‘Burning Widows, Burning Brides: The Perils of Daughterhood in India’, *Pacific Affairs* 61, no. 3, 1988, 465–85; Lindsey Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah*; Sreenivasan, ‘Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines’; Anne Hardgrove, ‘Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India’, *The Journal of South Asian Studies* 58, no. 3, 1999, 723–52.

however, never to be venerated as a *Sati Mata* (goddess) by the Rajputs, an honour reserved only for Rajput queens.



FIGURE 5.4: Handprints of the Four *Pardayats* and a *Badaran* who Immolated Themselves upon the Death of Man Singh (d. 1843).

Photograph by author.

*Location:* Lohapol (Iron Gate), Mehrangarh, Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

Note that the *chura*, a symbol of conjugality for concubines, was severed from their handprints left behind, which was never the case with queens who performed *sati*.

In case a concubine chose to live on after the death of her ruler, she came to be known as *khalsa ki pardayat* or ‘concubine of the state’, and could choose between staying in the *janana* or moving to local palaces (*talheti mahal*) or to her *jagir*. If a *khalsa ki pardayat* died in the *janana* or a concubine predeceased her master, then she was duly bestowed with funeral honours. Such honours included the observation of mourning for 13 days wherein holy scriptures were read in the household, donations were offered to eleemosynary communities and beating of the royal drum was suspended once out of the ordained four times every day.<sup>76</sup> In sharp

<sup>76</sup> *Maharaja Man Singhji re pardayat Shree chota Rupjyotji devlok huva udh ri bahi*, no. 195, letter 10, VS 1895/1838, MMPP.

contrast to these elaborate rituals, the dead body of a concubine, like that of the other serving classes, was carried out of the Rajput house from its back gates. The dead bodies of the elite family members—including the king, his blood relatives and his wives—were, however, always carried out with an elaborate procession from the front gates of the Rajput palace.

Moreover, till the early twentieth century, deceased members of the elite family were cremated at Mandore, the ancient capital of Marwar, and their cremation point was protected with a *chattri* (an umbrella-shaped cenotaph). However, a concubine, like the other subordinates, was cremated in a separate cremation ground called Kaga (literally meaning garden of the crow), situated below the Rathor citadel in Jodhpur. This practice saved the costs on the death processions of subordinates and was primarily intended to maintain segregation of serving groups from the masters of the Rajput house. The concubines, like the other serving classes, were therefore also devoid of receiving a *chattri* that was a symbolic structure of royal shelter. The fleeting elevation of 'other' caste women as the concubines of Rajput rulers was thus only superficial, crafted to suit the image of their master and his home.

## CONCLUSION

Laid on the axis of servitude, sentiment and subordination, the Rajput institution of concubinage had a multifaceted past. The position of a concubine, on the one hand, enveloped natal alienation, refashioning of identity and monetary dependence on the master. At the same time, concubinage was underlined, even if to a regulated extent, by affect, desire and companionate sentiments. The placement of these secondary conjugal partners at the border of the hierarchical string between 'elite' and the 'non-elite' females of the house marked their distinct yet ambiguous status in the household. But unlike popular perception, concubinage was not limited to sexual service alone.

Rather, the institution of concubinage was an active contributor to Rajput state formation. Like marriage, concubinage was foremost an assertion of the dominant male power. By circumscribing the position of concubine, it simultaneously worked to bolster the Rajput insistence on purity of blood-line, that is, not just an assured patrilineal descent but also

an assured Rajput matrilineal descent. Through the concubines' progeny and their endogamous marriage networks, concubinage also helped the Rajputs to expand affinal networks and functioned as a mode of harnessing further political and household assistants. The everyday roles performed by concubines were moreover integral to the sustenance of the Rajput home and its public image.

Although the economic, political, social and cultural roles of the concubines were glossed over as their prerogatives, these women were certainly not passive or docile. Of course, patriarchal power did not allow them to exert agency beyond the margins of their assigned elevation. Their relative elevation was, however, a crucial contributor to their ambivalent position. And it was the ambiguity of their crafted position that became synonymous with 'illegitimacy' at the onset of the 'modern era' in late nineteenth century wherein the much-needed termination of the institution was easily justified as moral censorship on part of the British and the missionaries, ignoring to take any onus for the future of the group members. While a discussion on the downfall of the institution and the fate of the surviving concubines and their descendants requires another essay, one must emphasise here that, despite its decline, the practice of concubinage cannot be circumscribed to a historical period because, like several other exploitative services in the past, concubinage has also led to present-day hierarchies and segregations in society.

In conclusion, it is important to recognise that the elite households in the past were active spaces with the domestic institutions of service bearing a recursive relationship with the public spaces. The distinction between the concubines and the queens and between the concubines and other domestic subordinates was in effect an extension of the ordering of formal politics. Garbed in a culturally ordained practice, concubines were after all servants employed to mediate power for their master and his state.

## Theorising Service with Honour

Medieval and Early Modern (1300–1700)  
Responses to Servile Labour

SUNIL KUMAR

The terms *naukar–naukari* and *banda* for servants and dependents are in common parlance certainly in the Hindi-speaking South Asian subcontinent today, both used quite innocently of their historical and etymological roots in a Persian and Turkic world of the Middle Ages. There are several such words in circulation with long histories: terms such as *‘ishq* or *gham*, whose finely tuned Sufi implications are perhaps accessible only to music aficionados with nostalgic appreciation of Hindustani songs of a generation ago. The loss of meaning of *banda* and *naukar–naukari*, slave and servant, however, is of a different order altogether since they were linked to larger social and political structural organisations where, even in the past, these two terms were perhaps most susceptible to ambiguity. As I hope to show in this Interjection, the mode in which slave and servant were cast in the textual literature of the Middle Ages and early modernity possessed a great elasticity of meaning that was always inferred contextually: crystal clear to those who used it, if somewhat more ambivalently received by those to whom it was addressed. In other words, we may remark today at the pliability that surrounded the usage of these terms but that would be from an entirely modern perspective; as a part of a lived experience of service, participants were well aware of their precise location in a range of stratified interpersonal relationships, the complicated manner in which these were frequently reported alerting us to the great investment that people attached to their meanings.

Although this Interjection covers a very long span, it draws largely upon Persian materials from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries Delhi Sultanate. I draw upon sufficient material from later periods, however, to clarify that the details that I lay out were those on which later understandings of service were constructed. The value in the textual materials that I use is their lack of inhibition while discussing servants and slaves who occupied (unusual) positions of responsibility.<sup>1</sup> While Persian chronicles from the Sultanate sometimes qualify that they are dealing with *khass* or elite slaves, the eulogistic tenor of their accounts makes it difficult to comprehend their passing remarks regarding the impact that the loss of self-identity and autonomy had on the lives of subordinates. Correlating these accounts with the more episodic references that survive from the lives of less privileged servants is therefore an extremely valuable corrective, drawing our attention to the element of power and coercion that could be otherwise sublimated even if it was an intrinsic part of all slave-servant experience. On the other hand, it is the more detailed histories of privileged servants that sensitise us to other tension-ridden aspects in the relationship between masters and servants. Often lost in the gloss of the loyal, obedient or the incarcerated servant is the considerable amount of independent agency that subordinates created for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Although the period 1300–1700 CE includes years of great state formations, we have to appreciate that for the larger part, these centuries saw the establishment of new ruling groups at different levels of society, almost all of humble

<sup>1</sup> For a useful coverage of the Persian textual materials used in this essay, see Sunil Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192–1286* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 362–77; Sunil Kumar, ‘Time and Its Didactic Possibilities: Sijzi’s *Fawa’id al-Fu’ad* and the Fourteenth-Century Chishtiyya’, in *Objects, Images, Stories: Simon Digby’s Historical Method*, ed. Francesca Orsini (Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Simon Digby, ‘The Indo-Persian Historiography of the Lodi Sultans’, in *Les Sources et le temps*, ed. F. Grimal (Pondichery: Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient, 2001), 243–61; Ali Anooshahr, ‘Author of One’s Fate: Fatalism and Agency in Indo-Persian Histories’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 49, no. 2, 2012, 197–224; Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> For an early discussion of this subject, see Sunil Kumar, ‘Service, Status and Military Slavery in the Delhi Sultanate of the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries’, in *Slavery & South Asian History*, ed. Richard Eaton and Indrani Chatterjee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 83–114.

social origins. This was an extremely open-ended society where normative social status was frequently upended even if it was quietly obscured on many occasions by a literati invested in suggesting the preservation of a synchronic status quo. And yet, since asymmetrical relationships between master and servant were imbricated in networks of power, the constant negotiation for greater political agency should hardly surprise us. While coercion, resistance and the search for autonomy were critical parts of these dyadic interpersonal relationships, they were not the themes that the Persian literati chose as subjects of discourse; it is the ascription of honour and loyalty to the mode in which these transactions were garbed that left a more universal marker on the society and culture of the age.

Keeping these general remarks in mind, my intervention in this essay studies the expectations that surrounded the conduct of the slave and the servant in the following three sections. The first section identifies the qualities of the ideal slave (*banda*) or servant enunciated by the literati of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and their great difficulty in finding such a person.<sup>3</sup> Rather than staying with the concept of the ideal slave, and consequent jural elisions, the literati eventually started focusing on an idealised concept of service that a servant might render, deriving it from the adjectival form of *banda*, that is, *bandagi*, one which could have more universal salience since it was not constrained by notions of unfreedom. The second section focuses on *naukari*, a term which contained complementary and transgressive ideas concerning the male servant, whose autonomy was derived from his skills and his pedigree, but whose honour was gathered from the selfless discharge of his responsibilities and loyalty to his master, thereby absorbing within it attributes of *bandagi*. Although the term came into currency only in the seventeenth century, this section charts the history of the moral economy that formulated and sustained this idea. The third section of the essay considers developments from the fifteenth century and after, when *naukari* no longer carried with it the implication of the servant as a mere object; now he constantly

<sup>3</sup> Note the remark of the Seljuq vizier, Nizam al-Mulk Tusi, on this subject: 'A slave whom one has brought up and promoted, must be looked after, for it needs a whole lifetime and good luck to find a worthy and experienced slave.' See Nizam al-Mulk, *Siyasat Nama. The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, translated by Hubert Darke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 117.



negotiated his skills and qualities for commensurate claims to respect and responsibilities. Despite the increasing presence of the servant as historical subjects in the fifteenth century, it is the unusual combination of naukari with bandagi that refines the concept of service in early modernity. These developments marked a South Asian genealogy for the development of service, allowing bandagi to temper the autonomy of the naukari by introducing an idealised sense of loyal servitude at an interpersonal level. Since bandagi was devoid of any unfree jural implications and had been reoriented to impact on naukari in critical ways, it also came to possess a passive, not adversarial (class), import on the social status of the servant.

In this Interjection I study the writings of different kinds of Persian literati: individuals who were the redoubt of social convention and seldom celebrated change unless it was purely contingent and to their profit. But their social constitution was also altering through the fourteenth century. Unlike the émigrés of the early thirteenth century, the stature of fourteenth-century litterateurs had to be carefully positioned within an increasingly expanding community of Muslims where genealogies, networks and achievements were subjects of increasing self-reflexive articulation. The shifts in the understanding of servanthood and service occurred amidst social transformations that gripped them as well. Their discursive interventions carry the cadence of their conflicted and ambivalent response to history, self-will and the autonomy of the individual. It is in this context that the shifts in the social composition of the litterateurs must be recognised as a huge transformative moment. As servants and skilled narrators, they were a body of acute participants in advantageously renegotiating the definitions of service. Under the influence of a new generation of writers, by the fifteenth century, servanthood and service could be explored and theorised in ways that could not have been countenanced by thirteenth-century authors.<sup>4</sup> The point of departure, however, was the slave, the banda, and increasingly the more expansive concept of bandagi which, as we will see in the

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of developments in the fourteenth century, see Kumar, 'Time and Its Didactic Possibilities', and from a different perspective, see Muzaffar Alam, 'The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan', in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131–98.

following section, enlarged and wrapped larger and more diverse bodies of people within its meaning.

## MARKING THE EXPANSIVE TERRAIN OF *BANDAGI*: BREAKING OUT OF DERACINATION

It is not clear why Sultanate chroniclers writing in Persian preferred *banda* (plural: *bandagan*) as a term for military slaves rather than *ghulam*, which was in circulation within the Persianate world, or *mamluk*, in favour in the Arabic-speaking world. But it should be noted that amongst the early thirteenth century chroniclers such as Fakhr-i Mudabbir, Hasan Nizami (both writing c. 1210–30) and Juzjani (died c. 1260s), *banda* was not the only term used for a slave; the preferred term of reference for a military slave was actually the ethnonym ‘Turk’.<sup>5</sup> As a result, it is only the contextual referencing or the absence of a ‘real’ *nisba* (geographical agnomen) in the name that allows readers of these Persian texts the chance to distinguish the free Turk from the unfree.<sup>6</sup>

The ambiguity in distinguishing slaves from others must have been deliberate since the chroniclers knew the unfree social backgrounds of

<sup>5</sup> See Hasan Nizami, *Taj al-Maʿasir*, translated by H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 2 (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, n.d.), 204–43; also see Bhagwat Saroop, Introduction to the English Translation of *Taj al-Maʿasir* (Delhi: Saud Ahmad Dehlavi, 1998); Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Taʾrikh-i Fakhr al-Din Mubarakshah*, ed. E. Denisson Ross (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1927); Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Adab al-Harb wa al-Shujaʿa*, ed. Ahmad Suhaili Khwansari (Teheran: Iqbal, 1968); Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Adab al-Muluk wa kifayat al-Mamluk*, ed. Muhammad Sarwar Maulavi (Teheran: Haidari, 1976); and Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, ed. Abdul Hay Habibi, 2 vols (Kabul: Anjuman-i Tarikh-i Afghanistan, 1963–64). For a discussion of the usage of Turk as slave, see Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 193–202, and Peter Jackson, ‘Turkish Slaves on Islam’s Indian Frontier’, in *Slavery & South Asian History*, 63–82.

<sup>6</sup> The *nisba* referenced the natal origins of the individual. Slavery, of course, erased this as a signifier. It was replaced by the either the abbreviated eponym of their master—Qutbi (*Qutb al-Din Ai-beg*); Shamsi (*Shams al-Din Iltutmish*, and so on)—or, in the case of slaves owned by the monarch, *al-Sultani*. Richard Bulliet’s work was important in developing a methodology for the study of *nisbas*: see Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

the protagonists in their narratives. By referring to them as Turks, these authors attempted to deflect the attention of readers away from their slave profile, and here the efforts of the chroniclers were quite different from the gloss that the Delhi Sultans gave to their bandagan. Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish (1210–36), for example, also gave his senior slaves Turkish names and titles, whether they were Turks or not, creating a monolithic, Turkic profile for his cadre. Turks did predominate within this group, many apparently still speaking Turkish since Fakhr-i Mudabbir advised ambitious secretaries to learn the language.<sup>7</sup> This titling marked a rite of passage, elevating the Turk as a proximate subordinate of the Sultan, distinguishing and distancing his military cadre from the rest of his subjects.<sup>8</sup> However, it is doubtful if the Delhi Sultans sought to obscure the slave antecedents of their great commanders. Certainly Orlando Patterson's observations regarding (violent) natal alienation and social death as the distinguishing feature of slavery help to explain why the Delhi Sultans relied upon such a deracinated body for political support and kept them segregated from the social networks that intruded into the political realm.<sup>9</sup> But it still does not explain the curious ways in which Sultanate chroniclers plotted the careers of slaves as Turks in their texts.

Although the mid-thirteenth century chronicler Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani did not hesitate to provide the history of enslavement of the great heroes of the Delhi Sultanate, it was transcribed as detail without any attached weighty significance.<sup>10</sup> More to the point, they were supposed to be exceptional warriors, possessed great honour, grace and deportment; their fate and destiny were blessed, and sometimes they received exceptional beneficence from a mystically charged intercessor. As in the case of the slave Iltutmish, who eventually became Sultan of Delhi (1210–36),

<sup>7</sup> Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Tārīkh*, 43–44.

<sup>8</sup> For a full discussion, see Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 195–202, and on titulature and nomenclature of rulers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Sunil Kumar, 'The Ignored Elites: Turks, Mongols and a Persian Secretarial Class in the Early Delhi Sultanate', in *Expanding Frontiers in South Asian and World History: Essays in Honour of John F. Richards*, eds Richard M. Eaton, Munis D. Faruqi, David Gilmartin and Sunil Kumar (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 60–62.

<sup>9</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> See Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, 2: 3–89.

Juzjani used Biblical stories to foreground God's mysteries that led to the happenstance of enslavement. Iltutmish, for example, was separated from his family like the Prophet Joseph. Both were favourites of their fathers, suffered violent sibling jealousy, kidnapping and eventual enslavement. As in the case of Joseph, Iltutmish was specially chosen by God to protect and lead the people of his new homeland during a period of crisis.<sup>11</sup> Juzjani mingled such miraculous intervention with normative tales of pastoral care, nourishment (*parwarish*) and training (*tarbiyat*) that masters should make available to their accomplished slaves. Iltutmish had profited from such considerate treatment from his first master, a merchant in Bukhara, and then from his master in Delhi, the military commander, Qutb al-Din Aibeg. And in between he had also been blessed with the good fortune of future sovereignty by a Sufi. The innate, congenial qualities of the slave were reflective of his high-birth: it won the blessings of a mystic and the love and patronage from his master. Such a subordinate was hardly 'a slave'—he was valued as the master's alter-ego, like a son, if not more loyal. Juzjani borrowed tropes present in Seljuqid (late eleventh century) and Ghaznavid literature (early eleventh century) to suggest that these qualities were particularly resplendent amongst Turks.<sup>12</sup>

If such was the reasoning of Juzjani, and before him of Fakhr-i Mudabbir and Hasan Nizami, these narratives were filled with irreconcilable details from the slave's life that challenged the idealistic image of the loyal slave-servant. Iltutmish, for example, usurped his master's throne, combated and killed his master's successor, and in an effort to deflect criticism from his actions, suggested dynastic continuity by marrying his master's daughter. Juzjani's masterful narrative of these events sought to obliterate the seriousness of all these developments; in his narration, the slave who was already like a son to his master had quite naturally become son-in-law and heir. This slave then proceeded to wage war against both, his own slave-peers and the slave-peers of his master—in the vocabulary of the day, those who

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1: 441; and for a discussion of the story, Blain H. Auer, *Symbols of Authority in Medieval Islam: History, Religion and Muslim Legitimacy in the Delhi Sultanate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 37–42.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the training of the banda, see Sunil Kumar, 'When Slaves were Nobles: The Shamsi *bandagān* in the Early Delhi Sultanate', *Studies in History* 10, no. 1, 1994, 23–52.

would have been (like) his brothers and uncles. And all this without an iota of criticism from Juzjani.<sup>13</sup> It was only decades later, after Iluttmish's death, when his slaves (bandagan) were in competition over the control over their master's patrimony, that Juzjani wondered at the strange, unnatural turn of events when comrade-in-arms warred with each other. In the logic of his reasoning, just as God had miraculously brought Iluttmish (Joseph-like) to save Hindustan, Juzjani now suggested that it had to be Satan who sowed seeds of distrust amongst those who the Delhi Sultan had nurtured and raised together to defend the Sultanate and Islam.<sup>14</sup>

How do we understand these political choices—raising slaves to such high political stature, but obscuring the full significance of such patronage and deployment? The question touches the complex structuring of society and politics that constituted the thirteenth-century Sultanate political system, an insight into which can be gained if we recognise that the deployment of the bandagan was only one aspect of the Sultan's efforts to recruit dependent personnel. Slaves were expensive and the Delhi Sultans looked for reliable military personnel that could be recruited more economically and in larger numbers. They found these personnel amongst social menials—mahouts, Afghans, Mongols and marginalised pastoral groups like the Khokhars, Jats and Bhattis. Their menial social status meant that, like the slaves, these people were also outside the elite political networks of the court and alliances that could oppose the monarch. Like slaves, they were also deracinated, but were different since they were not 'socially dead'. They were recruited in large numbers into Sultanate armies and garrisoned strategic redoubts in the North-West against the Mongols or closer to Delhi. In other words, like the slaves, the Sultans occasionally appointed these *déracinés* to strategic positions. Even if their appointments were not to the highest positions in the state, the direction of monarchical patronage provides an insight into the nature of the political system that relied upon plebeian people from the very outset.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a full discussion, see Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 130–38.

<sup>14</sup> See Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, 2: 73.

<sup>15</sup> For a full discussion, see Sunil Kumar, 'Bandagi and Naukari: Studying Transitions in Political Culture and Service under the North Indian Sultanates, Thirteenth–Sixteenth Centuries', in *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60–108.

The favour shown to these bandagan-like subordinates was exceptional because through the thirteenth century the Delhi Sultans had the opportunity to recruit a variety of aristocrats fleeing from the Mongols into Hindustan but they were extraordinarily restrained in appointing free-born elites to high positions. The only exception to this general rule were the *ahl-i qalam* (people of the pen), a diverse body of people who were literate, possessed different levels of training in theology, jurisprudence, diplomatics, epistolography, rhetorics, mathematics and accountancy. The Delhi Sultans exerted themselves to recruit such *ahl-i qalam*; not only were they vital to establish governance, but they were also thin on the ground and their presence brought renown to the court. Although many of these people were skilled warriors and generals, their fame did not derive from their martial exploits; it was their learning and their good breeding, their comportment and high social birth that won them respect. Thirteenth-century authors seldom overtly referenced their qualities in their texts, but they gave away enough to reveal the great respect commanded by their skills and learning. It is also important to keep in mind that it was the social and literary interventions of these early authors that formulated the Persianate cultural arena that identified the social and political formations of the Delhi Sultanate with Islam and they were keen in presenting this as a world inhabited by a united Muslim community sans tensions and fractures.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the thirteenth century, the social profile of the litterateurs had altered considerably and so too their reportage on the Sultanate. Unlike Juzjani and the early chroniclers who were émigrés to the Subcontinent, this was a new second- and third-generation literati, sometimes like Amir Khusrau (died 1325) of mixed parentage, others like 'Isami (completed *Futuh al-Salatin*, 1350) and Barani (completed final version of *Ta'rikh-i Firuz Shahi*, 1357) whose families had lived in the Subcontinent for some generations and served the Delhi Sultans for nearly a century. Although the thirteenth-century Persian chroniclers were very discreet about critiquing the Delhi Sultans about their choice of subordinates, fourteenth-century texts had a remarkably different tenor. The Persian histories of Ziya' al-Din Barani and 'Isami for the first time conflated servants of low birth and slaves, especially

<sup>16</sup> Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 212–26.

the young, newly purchased slaves, deriding them all for being uncouth and of menial parentage.<sup>17</sup> Outside courtly circles a newly emerging Sufi literature did not side-step the jural status of slaves, a subject universally ignored by the early Persian chroniclers. During one of his congregational gatherings, the Sufi Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya (died 1325) counselled his disciples on modes of atonement for killing an individual who did not have an heir. The Sufi advised his congregation that in such a situation a Muslim should free a slave. He went on to explain his reasoning: since you could not bring the dead to life, you should free a slave. As he explained it, 'in freeing a slave, it is as if one has brought a dead person back to life.'<sup>18</sup> The Sufi could be exceedingly harsh in his evaluation of Turkish slaves and on another occasion, he recalled an anecdote regarding a secretary in the service of a Turk commander. A ghost was haunting the secretary and after some time spoke and questioned the scholar: 'Why do you stand before this man? You are free and he is a slave, he is ignorant and you are learned, you are cultured and he is a sinner.'<sup>19</sup> Within the context of Sultanate society where such asymmetrical relationships abounded, this critique may not have been new, but it was the first time it was textualised and, judging by the popularity of the Shaykh's teachings, hungrily devoured.

What had changed in the intervening period was the intense criticism of slaves seizing political agency and establishing roots in Sultanate society. It was impossible to keep up the fiction of the socially dead slave who served his master more loyally than his son; too many had ignored the diktat of their masters and worked to protect their own interests. Barani noted how during the reign of Sultan Kaiqubad (1287–90), the sons of slaves (*maulazadgan*) were in alliance with recent Mongol converts (*nau-Musalman*) and established resplendent households (*khaikhhanas*) that were centres of insurrection.<sup>20</sup> Although Iltutmish's slaves had always

<sup>17</sup> Kumar, 'Ignored Elites', 53–57, and Kumar, 'Service, Status and Military Slavery', 97–107.

<sup>18</sup> Amir Hasan Sijzi, *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, ed. Khwaja Hasan Thani Nizami Dihlawi (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 1990), 238–39.

<sup>19</sup> Sijzi, *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, 342–43.

<sup>20</sup> Ziya' al-Din Barani, *Ta'rikh-i Firuz Shahi*, ed. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1860–62), 134. See also the discussion in Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 318–24.

displayed this initiative, it had not become a subject of comment and reflection. The fourteenth-century chroniclers remarked on these issues since their own social profiles had altered in the interim. They had deep lineages in Sultanate society and, more like the Sufi Nizam al-Din Auliya, they were not hesitant to criticise the upstart slave whose ambitions challenged normative social hierarchies.

Sufi ideology, however, accessed the trope of the ideal *banda* towards its own ends and coined the term *bandagi* to communicate obedient servitude. Just as the ideal slave was expected to render abject obedience and loyalty to his master, so should Muslims perform *bandagi* towards God.<sup>21</sup> Removed from its historical context, *bandagi* became a term that could be ascribed to the kind of slave-like service that ardent Muslim rendered to God and, by extension, any master, especially a Sufi Shaykh. The circulation of the idea of *bandagi* in the fourteenth century was paradoxically coterminous with the critique of the *bandagan* whose conduct did not abide by the highest principles associated with service. In that sense, *bandagi* was disassociated from the jural implication of slavery and validated as a paradigmatic service that could be rendered to an individual that one voluntarily regarded as his/her master.<sup>22</sup> When a Muslim therefore said that 'I will serve you like a slave', it was not a demeaning statement but an elevating one. It implied that service would be rendered as one does to God. But in disassociating service from the jural conception of slavery, this theoretical position also provided the servant with free-will and political autonomy to chart his/her course of action. In that sense *bandagi* came to define the kind of service that one could render, but it was an incomplete thought since it did not define the nature of the servant or his/her social standing which might also inflect the nature of service. As the idea of *bandagi* developed, so was also honed the idea of the servant, *naukar*, and the dyad comprised a new sense of service contained in the idea of *naukari*. Although this term came into currency not earlier than the seventeenth century, I am more interested in the patterns of conduct that the term might have encapsulated and its formation between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>21</sup> This usage is clearly evident in Sijzi, *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> See Kumar, '*Bandagi* and *Naukari*', 106–07.



## SOCIAL ENTITLEMENT AND *NAUKARI*

Naukari is the adjectival form of the noun *naukar*, and I develop my understanding of the term from two contrasting sources: the first is the Mongol form where it means bondsman, ally and associate; the second is the way Dirk Kolff used the term, in the narrow sense as service, and more generally as the product of a vast military labour market produced by the widespread mobilisation of peasant armies by innumerable post-fifteenth century warlords searching for resources and conquests.<sup>23</sup> I amend Kolff's interpretation inasmuch as I do not believe that the military labour market was merely a fifteenth-century phenomenon—the dire need for military personnel had already led the Delhi Sultans to the recruitment of a wide range of social menials. But more to the point, *naukari* carried with it a special cadence concerning service with honour which brought some aspects of its Sultanate usage closer to its Mongol etymology. There was another term also used for servant in the fifteenth century—*chakar*. Its late usage casts some doubt about the etymology of the term; at least according to Beckwith, it is of Persian etymology and was originally somewhat of a synonym for *naukar*.<sup>24</sup> More work needs to be done on the widespread usage of this term, but if Beckwith is right, its transmission to the Subcontinent was mysteriously late and it was rather surprisingly adopted concurrently in Persian, as well as Sanskrit and early vernacular texts. In Persian, the word *chakar* was denuded of its sense of honour and hence differentiated from the *naukar* who had a clearer sense of social entitlement. As Zeigler's research shows, this was not the case in early Marwari texts where *chakar* and *naukar* were near synonyms.<sup>25</sup>

Naukars were always very different from the *bandagan* and, while considering *bandagi*, I had mentioned the *ahl-i qalam*, a learned body of people with a portfolio of skills and sense of social entitlement, who were

<sup>23</sup> Dirk H. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> C. I. Beckwith, 'Aspects of the Early History of the Central-Asian Guard Corps in Islam', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 4, 1984, 29–43.

<sup>25</sup> See Norman P. Zeigler, 'Rajput Loyalties during the Mughal Period', in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. John F. Richards (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 259–64, 268–70.

also servants of the Delhi Sultans. Nizami 'Aruzi Samarqandi's *Chahar Maqala*, written sometime in the 1160s in the Bamiyanid dominion of Ghur, elaborated on the esteemed learning of these personnel and the great honour that Muslims generally and the lords of the land specifically should shower on them.<sup>26</sup> In the early thirteenth century, this was also the subject of discussion in Fakhr-i Mudabbir's introductory chapters to his *Adab al-Muluk wa Kifayat al-Mamluk* (completed c. 1230) where he discussed Sultanate administrators. In every instance Fakhr-i Mudabbir emphasised the importance of birth, learning and social comportment; without these qualities there would be no appreciation of precedent and history, or the ability to transact delicate social responsibilities.<sup>27</sup> On a more material level, the skills required to maintain the registers of finance, to keep a record of armed contingents, distribution of plunder between the soldiers and the retaining of the fifth (*khums*) were left in the charge of these personnel and their skills in maths (*siyaq*) and accountancy (*hisab*).

At least in the early thirteenth century, there were very few of the ahl-i qalam who had deigned to participate in the Ghurid campaigns, even fewer staying on if patronage was available in Afghanistan. This changed with the Mongol invasions commencing in the 1220s, when jurists and litterateurs like Juzjani, Aufo, Kufi and the ancestors of 'Isami and Ziya' al-Din Barani chose Hindustan as refuge. They were immediately patronised by Iltutmish who placed such individuals in charge of his newly constructed mosques and 'idgahs. These were émigrés of learning in the juridical and theological sciences, displaced from their homelands and through whom the Delhi Sultans sought to recreate a united Muslim community, cohering the dispersed émigrés around an unambiguous reading of Shari'ati Islam.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Nizami 'Aruzi Samarqandi, *Chahar Maqala*, ed. Mohammad Qazvini and Mohammad Mo'in (Teheran: Zawwar Bookshop, 1955–57), and translated in English by E. G. Browne, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series O.S. XI.2 (London: Luzac and Co. Ltd., 1978).

<sup>27</sup> See Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Adab al-Muluk*, and the discussion in Sunil Kumar, 'The Value of *Adab al-Muluk* as a Historical Source: An Insight into the Ideals and Expectations of Islamic Society in the Middle Period (A.D. 945–1500)', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 22, no. 3 1985, 307–27.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 65–78, 212–37.

These details are important to consider because it was the combination of displacement and destruction of Muslim homelands, and their refuge in Hindustan that propelled the ahl-i qalam into a relationship with the Delhi Sultans. This in turn inspired them to recreate their slave masters as valorous (respectworthy) Turks. But in this emerging condominium of interests, the ahl-i qalam possessed economic and social resources which they could leverage with confidence—not least because they were servants of God and His community (and not the monarch or his deputies), but also because many of them had an independent standing as merchants. We have to keep in mind that from the ranks of these learned litterateurs appeared the *tujjar* (merchants), the *ra'is* (urban notables), the *fuqaha* and *qazis* (jurists and judges), the *'ulama* and the Sufis (the learned in theology and mysticism), and a whole range of secretaries, sometimes referenced as *tajiks* (Persian speakers). The social profiles of these individuals overlapped all the time and at different times they accepted service as secretaries or jurists.

If they linked their careers with the Sultanate—and many were recalled with respect for their stubborn resistance to the lure of wealth and power—they proved to be dependent allies who kept their social personalities intact despite claims made on their loyalty and fealty. Other than the remarkable career of the universally respected jurist Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani, the ability to mix autonomy with service is well brought out by the example of the Kirmani Sayyid and Sufi from the reign of Muhammad Tughluq (1324–51), a member of one of the most respected families of his age, who was requested to serve as an administrator. The Sayyid was willing as long as he was not required to cut his hair and change his dress that distinguished him as a Sayyid.<sup>29</sup> A more complex example of such a courtly servant would be Amir Khusrau (died 1325), the son of Iltutmish's banda who took to learning rather than soldiering and navigated his career as the most successful court poet of his time. His eulogies of the Delhi Sultans are prized literary masterpieces, but in history he is remembered also for his great love which embellished his poetry dedicated to his Sufi Shaykh, Nizam al-Din Auliya (died 1325). He served seven sultans but

<sup>29</sup> See Amir Khurd, *Siyar al-Awliya*, ed. Sayyid Mahdi Ghuri (Lahore: Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i Farsi Iran wa Pakistan, no. 23, Mu'assi-yi Intisharat-i Islami, 1978), 221–28.

acknowledged only the Sufi as his master and was buried at his feet.<sup>30</sup> Despite these examples, the full implications of naukari would actually become visible only in the enlarged spaces of the far more complex social world of the mid-fourteenth century. Just as the heterogeneous world of 'upstarts' of the fourteenth century form the sense of bandagi and servitude, so too did the changing profile in the composition of the ahl-i qalam lend sense to the dimensions of naukari.

In their critique of the Sultanate, fourteenth-century Persian chroniclers had much to complain about the patronage of the menial and low-born by the Delhi Sultans. Assuredly many of these were Mongol nau-Musalman and maulazadgan military commanders and governors. But they went further to bring in people who were now breaking into the ranks of the ahl-i qalam in their criticism as well. They recounted how so many parvenus who were now being appointed to high secretarial positions were from families of lowly merchants, gardeners and alcohol brewers. Such appointments of low-born to responsible positions meant that the Muslim community would be ill-served, jeopardising the fate of the Sultanate. Facing a frustrating loss of patronage and wealth, the once politically important Ziya' al-Din Barani weaved one apocryphal tale after another of different sultans who had peremptorily removed the most powerful administrators from office, suspecting them of menial birth. He narrated Sultan Ghiyas al-Din Balban's governance (1266–87) as a paradigm for the incumbent Sultan Firuz Shah (1351–88) because he reportedly only patronised aristocrats. Barani's critique was from the perspective of a privileged, powerful servant who had lost everything, his position usurped by these upstarts.<sup>31</sup> But if it was not birthright, what entitled these upright secretaries to high office?

Some of the factors involved in the transition in careers over time can be gleaned from two accounts of Tughluq administrators whose service spanned the reigns of Muhammad Tughluq (1324–51) and Firuz Shah

<sup>30</sup> Sunil Sharma, *Amir Khusrau: The Poet of Sultans and Sufis* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> On Barani's rancour, see Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India: Studies in Indo-Muslim Historical Writing* (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1966); Peter Hardy, 'The oratio recta of Barani's *Tā'rikh-i Firūz Shāhī*—Fact or Fiction?' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 20, no. 1/3, 1957, 315–21.

(1351–88). The first was a brahman slave called Kannu captured from Telingana during the Deccan campaigns of Muhammad Tughluq. 'Afif notes in his *Ta'rikh-i Firuz Shahi* (completed early fifteenth century; uncertain date) that he was wise but illiterate in Persian, but he must have mastered the language very quickly. Muhammad Tughluq espoused his conversion to Islam upon which he was freed. His capacity for keeping records was appreciated not just by the Sultan but also by his commanders who would bring their accounts to him for a quick review. His skill, fidelity and careful politicking meant that he survived the regnal transition to Firuz Shah's reign. That monarch rewarded him with the title of Khan-i Jahan and the position of vizier. From an ignorant, lowly slave, Kannu capitalised on his intelligence to learn and network to eventually become the most important servant of his master. From being socially dead, the slave gained sufficient trust for the Sultan to honour his lineage and, on the father's death, the Sultan appointed his son as vizier. Barani, who was normally exceptionally abusive of such upwardly mobile natives (*mutawattinan*), was judiciously silent with regard to this very powerful courtier.<sup>32</sup>

During Firuz Tughluq's reign, Khan-i Jahan's position was briefly tested by another administrator, 'Ain al-Mulk Mahru, whose social antecedents are somewhat unclear.<sup>33</sup> Ibn Battuta (travelled in India: 1333–46) had first noticed him as a governor of Awadh in Muhammad Tughluq's reign and mentioned that he was 'Indian', in other words, not a recent émigré but someone whose family converted to Islam in the near past.<sup>34</sup> Barani also remarked on the social pedigree of 'Ain al-Mulk and his brothers during Muhammad Tughluq's reign, describing them as mere 'clerks and shop keepers, *nawisandagan o baqqalan*' and contrasted them with the courtiers

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion in Kumar, 'Bandagi and Naukar'.

<sup>33</sup> For a long time, 'Ain al-Mulk ibn Mahru was confused with 'Ain al-Mulk Multani, a Khalaji governor, notably by Abdul Rashid, 'Insha-i Mahru or Tarassul-i-'Ain-ul-Mulki', *Islamic Culture* 16, 1942, 279–90, and in Rashid's introduction to the edited text of 'Ain al-Mulk 'Abd Allah-i Muhammad Sharaf ibn Mahru, *Insha-yi Mahru* (Lahore: University of Punjab, 1965), 1–3, 10, 11–12. The confusion was finally resolved by Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 329.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*, translated by Agha Mahdi Husain (Baroda: Oriental Institute, Gaekwad Oriental Series, no. 122, 1976), 105.

who had served the Sultan for generations.<sup>35</sup> 'Ain al-Mulk obviously did not abide by privileged stereotypes; he must have been extremely intelligent and a very efficient administrator under Muhammad Tughluq. As governor of Awadh, 'Ain al-Mulk brought great prosperity to the region during the mid-1330s and the period of famine in the Ganga–Jumna doab. This drew the attention of the Sultan who considered appointing him governor of the Deccan, a development that 'Ain al-Mulk and his brothers misunderstood and rebelled. 'Ain al-Mulk was captured and eventually pardoned, but his brothers were perhaps killed. Muhammad Tughluq eventually appointed 'Ain al-Mulk as *mushrif* (accountant), a position that he must have discharged efficiently and with sufficient diplomacy for Firuz Shah to confirm on his accession. 'Ain al-Mulk's burgeoning confidence brought him into conflict with the vizier, Khan-i Jahan. At one level, this was not entirely surprising: both the administrators were upstart natives and had used their skills to excel within the Sultanate's cultural and political world to reach the highest positions in the Sultan's chancery. But the conflict did not work out well for 'Ain al-Mulk and it was fortunate that the Sultan prized his skills sufficiently to appoint him governor of Multan and, to further assuage his ego, exempted him from the vizier's supervision.<sup>36</sup> The precise dates of these developments are uncertain but they belong to the decade of the 1360s.

'Ain al-Mulk obviously felt the slight deeply, not just at a personal level, but also in his capacity as an able administrator. He therefore proceeded to compile a volume of model letters titled *Insha-yi Mahru*. These letters are an eloquent testimony to the governor's erudition on subjects relating to law and the Qur'an, his experience of high administrative positions, his linguistic abilities as a secretary, and his vast network of friends and dependents. Letter number sixteen, for instance, dealt with the status of charitable endowments, *waqfs*, in the Multan province. It communicated 'Ain al-Mulk's historical awareness of settlements in the region, his comprehension of administrative requirements, and his knowledge of practice, precedent and law that governed the maintenance of *waqfs*. As a cogent summation of the problem at hand, the letter conveyed the abilities

<sup>35</sup> See Barani, *Ta'rikh-i Firuz Shahi*, 485–87, and below for a further discussion.

<sup>36</sup> For 'Ain al-Mulk's relations with Khan-i Jahan and the episode that led to his removal from Delhi, see Shams Siraj, 'Afif, *Ta'rikh-i Firuz Shahi* (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1888–91), 407–18.

of the adept administrator, and as an example of a mellifluous, understated, self-abnegating petition to the monarch, it displayed the breeding of a courtier cognisant of courtly protocols while addressing his sovereign.<sup>37</sup> In the context of 'Ain al-Mulk's well-known animosity towards the vizier and his marginalisation from the court, the *Insha* served as an important corrective to any possible slander regarding his learning, as well as his competence and loyalty as an administrator.

The *Insha* and the events leading towards its production provide a rare insight into competition over precedence amongst the secretarial elite, but more significantly it communicates the manner in which this competition could provoke a display of professional competence to bolster advantageous terms of service. The point is of significance in the context of Khan-i Jahan and 'Ain al-Mulk since their standing in the court was not based upon birthright; their status resided entirely on their scholastic and administrative achievements. This was very, very distant from Fakhr-i Mudabbir's advice regarding the recruitment of administrators. But more to the point, Barani, who had scathingly described 'Ain al-Mulk and his brothers as mere 'clerks and shop keepers' in the 1330s while recording events during Muhammad Tughluq's reign, revised his opinion in his record of Firuz Tughluq's reign in the 1360s and eulogised 'Ain al-Mulk as 'noble by temperament and lineage'. The author made no effort to reconcile or contextualise his divergent estimations of 'Ain al-Mulk, leaving it to the reader to make sense of this transition.<sup>38</sup>

As examples of low-born secretaries seizing the high ground, Khan-i Jahan and 'Ain al-Mulk were merely two from the many abbreviated references that we have from the fourteenth-century Sultanate. In this historical development we see the faint glimmers of a conceptualisation of naukari where service was based upon skill, aptitude and initiative. Fakhr-i Mudabbir and Juzjani had held aloft the principle that knowledge was the

<sup>37</sup> See 'Ain al-Mulk, *Insha-yi Mahru*, 37–39.

<sup>38</sup> See Barani, *Ta'rikh-i Firuz Shahi*, 485–87, and for the recanting of this opinion in Firuz Tughluq's reign, see Barani, 584. Barani produced two versions of his *Ta'rikh* and his second recension carried a more vicious account of 'Ain al-Mulk and his brothers. For a comparison of this episode in Barani's two recensions, see Peter Hardy, 'Didactic Historical Writing in Indian Islam', in *Islam in Asia*, ed. Yohanan Friedeman (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 53–55.

privilege of birthright and the two combined to provide the ahl-i qalam with the space for status and respect which differentiated them from the bandagan and bandagi. But the fourteenth century witnessed a reordering that redefined bandagi as well as naukari. The irascible comments of Barani underline the challenge that the new claims to entitlement posed to the social order of the Delhi Sultanate. Nor was Barani in any way exceptional; opposition came from many quarters, including the Sufis. At the end of the fourteenth century, Sufi Shaykh Sayyid Muhammad Gisudaraz spoke sharply to his congregation, advising them against leaving their children with household maids since the high born would then learn their common language and habits.<sup>39</sup> Earlier in the century, Nizam al-Din narrated the story of a Sayyid who realised that the child he was raising as his own from a slave woman could not be so because his comportment was deficient. And sure enough he discovered that the real father was a slave.<sup>40</sup> In other words, even as opportunities were shaping possibilities of social and political entitlement through naukari in some social circles, there was also a hardening of positions concerning possible miscegenation and those regarded as parvenu social climbers.<sup>41</sup> The discordance in holding on to aspects of an archaic social status quo should strike us as significant because it was often the people whom we regard today as liberal and ecumenical that kept different parts of its trapping intact. Equally, it cannot be ignored that much of their disapproval was judiciously directed away from the most powerful and successful. It would need a new kind of political ordering introduced by the baseborn Afghans in the mid-fifteenth century to give a final form to bandagi and naukari.

## NAUKARI AND BANDAGI: A REFASHIONED GENEALOGY FOR HONOURABLE SERVICE

If bandagi made people with certain skill sets and social backgrounds accessible as valuable servants to fourteenth-century Delhi Sultans,

<sup>39</sup> Sayyid Akbar Husaini, *Jawami' al-Kalim*, ed. Muhammad Hamid Siddiqi (Kanpur: Intizami Press, 1937), 70.

<sup>40</sup> Sijzi, *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, 413–14.

<sup>41</sup> See Sayyid Akbar Husaini, *Jawami' al-Kalim*, 107–8, on the dangers of fathering children from slave girls, *kanizak*.



naukari gave the opportunity to personnel of a different level of scholastic training to serve masters without loss of personal status. The working out of the respective spheres of these kinds of service was not quite exclusive, although the examples of people like ‘Ain al-Mulk were still exceptional. The persisting conundrum in the writings of the ideologues of this period concerned how to navigate the disjunction between the implications of service and social and political status. Barani communicated this quandary as it appeared to the ahl-i qalam rather evocatively in verse in his *Ta’rikh* (final recension, 1357)

Don’t bestow a pen on the contemptible (*dun*) and an opportunity  
(*majal uftad*) to the heavens,  
to turn the black stone in the Ka’ba into an ablutionary rock (*sang-i  
istinja*).<sup>42</sup>

There is, of course, a lot that is familiar in the enunciation of these ideas; stakeholders in other cultural and social patterns discussed in this book reiterated equally exclusionary sentiments in different ways. Like them, Barani’s efforts to normalise his sense of entitlement also carried with it an air of collaboration—the Delhi Sultans should appreciate the perspective of the aristocratically inclined ahl-i qalam and mould the world placed under their charge accordingly. It was a point worth emphasising because the Delhi Sultans did not usually follow this script. The real challenge facing the ahl-i qalam was that the social profiles of their monarchs were not very different from their bandagan or some of their less savoury naukars. At different junctures in their careers these military adventurers had all tested the limits of deracination—they had established networks, alliances with other marginalised groups, established homestead and homelands as stepping stones to power. Every such exercise of autonomy had tested and enlarged the boundaries of bandagi and naukari.

It had to wait for the coming of the Afghans and Mughals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, different kind of émigrés to the Subcontinent, to bring bandagi and naukari closer, with overlapping aspects but with differing results. The Afghans had been present in some numbers in the Delhi Sultanate from the early thirteenth century but they were first noticed in the service of the Delhi Sultans in the 1260s in military campaigns

<sup>42</sup> Barani, *Ta’rikh-i Firuz Shahi*, 38.

in areas adjacent to Delhi led by Ulugh Khan, the future Sultan Balban. From the very beginning, courtiers like Juzjani and Barani derided the Afghans for their rustic manners, their appearance and language, a social marginalisation that favoured their military deployment. Unlike the more rapid rise to power of the equally marginalised Khalaj (the founders of the Khalaji regimes in Delhi, Bengal and Malwa), the Afghans remained dispersed and were seldom referenced as a group in Sultanate records. In the disturbed conditions in the north-west, prior to and after Timur's invasion (1398–99), and the establishment of trade and passage across the Hindu Kush, there was an unprecedented migration of Afghans into the Subcontinent amongst whom were the Lodi family. From their settlements in the Punjab region, the Lodi family were recruited by the Sayyids and settled in Delhi in the early fifteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

Quite in contrast to the other Delhi Sultans, the Lodis were exceptional in that no claims to an old-fashioned, conventional urbanity or high social birth were retrospectively grafted to their histories by the ahl-i qalam—and they had their share of nostalgic raconteurs. Mushtaqi (died 1581), one of their earliest chroniclers, glorified 'Ballu', the future Sultan Bahlul Lodi (1451–89), and how he was particularly comfortable in the rambunctious camp-ground together with his affectionate Afghan mates, but was equally adept in advantageously dealing with the intricate stratagem of Delhi courtiers. He gained power by disarming the shrewd vizier of the Sayyid monarch by the boisterous simplicity of his comrades. When Bahlul Lodi's military cohort was not allowed into the privileged courtly discussion, Mushtaqi reported the complaint of Bahlul's soldiers at their exclusion: 'We are not the [domestic] servants (chakars) of Ballu, they asserted, but like him, they were the naukars of the Sayyid Sultan and should be so treated.'<sup>44</sup> In short, the Afghans capitalised on the centuries of derision heaped on them to turn the tables on insulated elites, comfortable in their own sense of entitlement and blind to the danger of subversion by simpleton savages.

<sup>43</sup> For the early history of the Afghans in the Delhi Sultanate, see Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, and details of their rise to prominence in the fifteenth century can be gleaned from Iqtidar H. Siddiqi, 'Rise of Afghan Nobility under the Lodi Sultans, 1451–1526', *Medieval India Quarterly* 4, 1961, 114–36.

<sup>44</sup> Rizq Allah Mushtaqi, *Waqi'at-i Mushtaqi*, ed. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui and Waqarul Hasan Siddiqi (Rampur: Reza Library, 2002), 5–6.

For a lengthy period of their history, the Afghans maintained their clan and lineage identities but with the accretion of power amongst the lineage heads, the Sultan and his subordinates had also introduced stratification and privilege that created tension amongst emerging competitors. This was most evident during periods of stress and conflict when assertions of loyalty were made in terms of service relationships which could extend beyond the Lodi state. Thus, when the Afghan commander of the Sultan of Jaunpur attacked Delhi and the Lodis felt compelled to sue for terms, they appealed to him as a brother. They asked him about his relationship with the Jaunpur monarch—‘I am a servant (chakar)’, he replied—and contrasted it tellingly with his relationship with the Afghan monarch of Delhi whom he regarded as a brother (*baradar*).<sup>45</sup> The weight of these interpersonal relationships was felt again at the time of the death of Bahlul Lodi (1489) when the Farmuli clan’s support for Sikandar Lodi was challenged by the Sahu Khayl, the clan of the Lodi lineage. The Sahu Khayl told the Farmulis not to meddle in affairs that were not theirs. At that time Khan-i Khanan, the leader of the Farmulis, indignantly told ‘Isa Khan Lodi of the Sahu Khayl that ‘he was the *naukar* of Padshah Sikandar and not anyone else’. Since his loyalty was not to the Sahu Khayl clan but only the monarch, he was entitled to speak on his master’s behalf, even on matters that concerned the family.<sup>46</sup>

Mushtaqi and Ferishta, who reported on these matters, were carefully articulating relationships based upon ethnicity, blood and service relationships. These could not be reduced to domestic servitude that was expected of slaves or chakar. Instead, Ferishta seized upon the Mongol term *naukar* to communicate the special sense of entitlement that animated the actions of Khan-i Khanan. He was from one of the great Afghan families that made the Lodi dispensation but he was also a servant. Ferishta wanted to communicate the sense of honour, belonging and participation, which were now inalienably linked with the duty of the invested servant—*bandagi* inflecting the sense of *naukari*. Nearly a century earlier, ‘Ain al-Mulk might have wished that Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq had displayed an appreciation

<sup>45</sup> Mushtaqi, *Waqi‘at-i Mushtaqi*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Muhammad Qasim Ferishta, *Ta‘rikh-i Firishta*, translated by John Briggs, vol. 1 (Delhi: Low Price Editions, 1990), 328–29.

of these sentiments in his relationship with some of his servants. How exactly had the world of the servant altered in the space of a century?

In keeping with his understanding of history, Mushtaqi provided an unusual amount of historical agency to the protagonists in his narrative. Ali Anooshahr had first noted Mushtaqi's interesting usage of *tadbir* or human volition as a causative explanation for extraordinary actions by individuals.<sup>47</sup> Although Mushtaqi did not shirk in reporting the miraculous and the inexplicable, he could also clarify that what appeared as miraculous was the consequence of careful human planning and foresight. Mushtaqi has Sultan Sher Shah Sur's (1540–45) military commander, Khawass Khan, explain to his awestruck audience that administrative efficiency in the management of supplies should be appreciated since this was 'not [because of any] *karamat* but my *tadbir*'.<sup>48</sup> The social background of the military commander was quite inconsequential in this narrative and it comes as some surprise then to discover that Khawass Khan was actually a slave military commander. Mushtaqi suggested that it was not natal alienation, social death or high birth but the quality of the service that was regarded as the embodiment of virtue.

With its emphasis on human volition, Ali Anooshahr had argued, correctly in my opinion, that the *Waqi'at* provides an early, incomparable insight into a world that was engaging with early modernity. Extending that argument further, it is my submission that one of the key vectors that allows for the evaluation of early modernity is the idea of 'service', servanthood and interpersonal relationships contained in the sixteenth-century didactic notions of *bandagi* and *naukari*. And the conjuncture of these ideas came together in the most dynamic, enabling form in the fifteenth century.

But it was a fleeting moment. Although Mushtaqi's *Waqi'at* concerned sultans and their military commanders, it abounded with miraculous stories, dream sequences and charismatic Sufis. Mushtaqi's history was at once more rounded in its understanding of 'political' than earlier chronicles—the author seemed to have learnt from the earlier Sufi literature on how to reference 'truth' more expansively, as also relationships. But we

<sup>47</sup> Anooshahr, 'Author of One's Fate'.

<sup>48</sup> Mushtaqi, *Waqi'at-i Mushtaqi*, 147.

should not forget that Sufi interpretations of bandagi can be contrasted with the search of the military slave for greater autonomy—his efforts to become an aspiring naukari, someone like Khawass Khan, for example.<sup>49</sup> As much as the Delhi Sultan's search for untrammelled authority by recruiting bandagan as subordinates, when Sufi saints argued that devout bandagi to God should be the paradigm for service, they were also slamming shut the opportunity for human agency to question and dissent. And especially after the literary interventions during the middle of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Sufi texts were not inhibited about referencing the sultan or temporal affairs in their teachings. Indeed, as we have already noticed in Mushtaqi's writings, but more generally as a process evident in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Sufis and their relationship with sultans were increasingly the subject of discussion in Sufi as well as courtly chronicles and these texts did not hesitate to extol that Sufis now had sultans as their disciples.<sup>50</sup> But paradoxically, sultans could not be the naukars of their Sufi masters, since Sufi Shaykhs were not given to allowing their disciples so much agency. In consonance with the reordered sense of bandagi (and not naukari), the disciples were in abject devotion to God and his friends (*auliya*). Much as we might admire Mushtaqi's intervention for its expansive undertone of liberal freedom to the individual, we need to recognise how the subject of the prized and honourable naukari was inherently transgressive—the imperial project found it difficult to countenance such a servant. Instead, we have to appreciate how (even if it is within a somewhat anachronistic understanding of modern freedom) the linking of naukari with bandagi ensured the servant's eventual incarceration within new and very covert webs of service.

<sup>49</sup> This is well brought out in the reminiscences of the military adventurer Dattu Sarwani included at the end of the manuscript of Shaykh Rukn al-Din's *Lata'if-i-Quddusi*, and very usefully studied by Simon Digby, 'Dreams and Reminiscences of Dattu Sarwani: A Sixteenth Century Indo-Afghan Soldier', *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 2, no. 2, 1965, 178–94.

<sup>50</sup> For the fourteenth century, see Kumar, 'Time and Its Didactic Possibilities', and for the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, see Jyoti Gulati Balachandran, *Narrative Pasts: The Making of a Muslim Community in Gujarat*, forthcoming.

## CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN *BANDAGI* AND *NAUKARI*

Barely a decade after Mushtaqi's death in 1581, 'Abbas Sarwani composed his history of Sher Shah Sur (reigned 1540–45), a *ta'rikh* that appeared cognisant of the tensions that existed between Lodi traditions of governance that enhanced the participatory role of its major constituents and the compulsions of imperial formation that challenged this initiative.<sup>51</sup> Sarwani consequently reported the quandary facing the aged Shaykh Bayazid because, as he observed, Sher Shah 'had changed the custom (*qa'ida*) of honouring the Afghan nobles' while fashioning his Sultanate. The author shared the reasons for hesitation and fear and at once quelled them. Sarwani had the Shaykh note with some relief that the monarch greeted him with humility and respect and 'observed the old traditions of my ancestors that prevailed in the Afghan community'.<sup>52</sup> Since the ambits of *bandagi* and *naukari* were so close in the reign of Sher Shah, Bayazid's fears reflected the tensions that the Sultan would not show discrimination—that imperium would have trumped custom.

The tension and dialectic between *bandagi* and *naukari* should not surprise us since they reflected contrasting appropriation of power by the master and the servant. This had a long history which had overlapping cadences as it developed. On the one hand, it reflected varied efforts by masters to recruit deracinated subordinates who would lack the social networks that could transform them into competitors. But it also reflected attempts by privileged elites to negotiate their social and intellectual skills into commensurate entitlements within the body politic. The complications in the system emerged violently in the fourteenth century as the deracinated rooted themselves in different sectors of Sultanate economy and society until the distinctions between the *banda* and the *naukar* started collapsing. The fashioning of the concept of *bandagi* by the mystically inclined at this time allowed for a rethinking of the meanings of 'service'. Notionally at least, the emerging paradigm was the abject service that was rendered by Muslims to God, and to God's friends

<sup>51</sup> 'Abbas Khan Sarwani, *Ta'rikh-i Sher Shahi*, ed. and tr. S. M. Imam al-Din, vols 1 and 2 (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1964).

<sup>52</sup> Sarwani, *Ta'rikh-i Sher Shahi*, 1: 166–67.

and servitors in the temporal world. Bandagi then retained the sense of abject servitude but cast within its new context it was disassociated from slavery and deracination so that it could enfold the naukari in very enabling ways. Some of the litterateurs who wrote for the Afghans understood relationships of service from this perspective but as the Afghans turned to imperial formation in the sixteenth century, bandagi and naukari required a fine tuning until the naukari could be valued only when he displayed his bandagi.

Writing in Akbar's court and thinking about Sher Shah, we have already noticed how carefully Sarwani was calibrating the sense of honour, tradition and service. In his imagination he had already fused the greatness of Sher Shah and Akbar—one was the antecedent of the other. There is already a great deal of literature on Akbar and Jahangir and how they described their powerful naukars as their disciples or *chelas*.<sup>53</sup> Lest there was some residual ambiguity about their relationship with the monarch, these powerful free Amirs also referred to themselves as *bandagan-i dargah*, slaves of the court. Sarwani was aware of the evolution of these trends and when he composed his *Ta'rikh-i Sher Shahi*, he was remarkably prescient about their future evolution. He noted about Sher Shah:

As the subjects of God [*bandagan-i haqq*] are all under your command  
You also submit [*bandagi kun*] to God and carry out His order;

<sup>53</sup> See John F. Richards, 'The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir', in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. John F. Richards (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 285–326; John F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 255–89. This scholarship has been usefully enlarged by recent work on the Mughal secretarial classes; see, for example, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Making of a Munshi', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2, 2004, 61–72; Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Witnesses and Agents of Empire: Eighteenth-Century Historiography and the World of the Mughal Munshi', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, no. 1/2, 2010, 393–423. And most recently, see the forthcoming volume, Ebba Koch and Ali Anooshahr, eds, *The Mughal Empire from Jahangir to Shah Jahan: Politics, Art, Architecture, Law, Literature and Aftermath*, Marg Foundation.

For every king who girded his loins for the obedience of God  
People also girded readily their loins for his service [*khidmatash*].<sup>54</sup>

This is a remarkably astute eulogy to the understanding of *naukari*, especially since the passage focuses largely on *bandagi*, the critical element that fashioned what we refer to rather inadequately today as ‘service’. In early modernity, the understanding of ‘service’ had an economy that embraced and was sustained by the ways in which ethnicity, networks, reciprocity and honour were conceptualised. And there was always a matrix of power within which the servant could negotiate his standing. The moral economy of this terrain was determined by the mode in which *bandagi* was allowed to inflect *naukari* and the rhetoric inevitably pulled the history of the concerned parties into its discursive trail. As the structures of these relationships were increasingly challenged by colonial modernity that did not easily penetrate ‘native society’, the complex understanding of *naukari* was translated as patrimonial, feudal or perhaps even more lazily as simply traditional and pre-modern. The salience of the formulation of *naukari* lies in the manner that it continued to defy material change. Linking ties of power and hierarchy with honour, morality and self-abnegation lent it a credence that transgressed the time and contexts of its formulation even if its contours altered until the sense of entitlement and autonomy once associated with *naukari* were sharply curtailed.

<sup>54</sup> Sarwani, *Ta'rikh-i Sher Shahi*, 1: 205; 2: 158. I have followed Imam al-Din's translation.





# II

## SERVANTS AND SERVICE

### EARLY COLONIAL



## 6 | Beyond Work

### The Social Lives and Relationships of Domestic Servants under Danish Rule in Early Colonial Bengal<sup>1</sup>

SIMON RASTÉN

#### INTRODUCTION

On the night of 9 August 1833 in the Danish<sup>2</sup> colonial town Serampore, Buxoo, a *syce* (stable attendant) working in a European home, tied up the *durwan* (gatekeeper) of the same household in the stable. Buxoo had been drinking heavily and was determined to teach the *durwan* a lesson by beating him up. Although Buxoo eventually changed his mind and set the *durwan* free, he was accused in Serampore's criminal court for his violent behaviour towards a fellow domestic servant.<sup>3</sup> During the interrogation, Buxoo admitted his act but explained that he had caught the *durwan* stealing grain from the horses and furthermore found him in 'an unseemly relationship with another syce'.<sup>4</sup> However, due to the lack of any proof, he had to withdraw these charges. The fact that the employer was at home that evening when the *durwan* was tied up spoke against

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the editors of this volume, I would like to thank Niels Brimnes, Silke Holmqvist, Bolette Frydendahl Larsen, Niels Nyegaard, Mikkel Venborg Pedersen and Karen Vallgård for commenting on earlier versions of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Until 1814, Denmark–Norway was a dual monarchy and many colonial officers, soldiers and merchants were Norwegians. However, for the sake of clarity and because this chapter is mainly occupied with the post-1814 period, I use here the terms Denmark, Danes and Danish.

<sup>3</sup> West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata (WBSA), Danish Records (DR), vol. 23, Faujdary, no. 95/1833. The police vs Buxoo Sais.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

Buxoo's explanation, since he could immediately have reported the durwan's apparent misconduct to their common master. The Danish judge thought it more likely that Buxoo 'was driven by revengefulness and sought to defame his fellow servant, who had been instructed by his mistress to keep an eye on the stable attendants in order to prevent them from stealing grain from the horses'.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Buxoo was sentenced to 14 days of public service in Serampore's penal institution.

Buxoo's case is one of the many that are found in a series of Danish administrative records from Serampore, which have hitherto been left untouched by scholars. These archival records were handed over to the British colonial administration in 1845 when Denmark sold its Indian possessions to Britain.<sup>6</sup> The records, which are kept today in West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, all relate to Serampore and consist of property registration books, public auction lists, wills and proceedings from the *diwani* (civil) and *faujdary* (criminal) courts, covering primarily the period from the 1820s to 1845. While English and Bengali are sometimes used, most of the more than 20,000 pages are written in Danish in Gothic script, and many volumes have over the years been severely damaged by moisture and ink corrosion. The linguistic and practical difficulties of reading the sources probably explain why they have not previously been explored, despite their potential of adding new knowledge to the history of both Bengal and Danish colonialism, hereunder perspectives on common servant lives such as Buxoo's. Based primarily on these colonial archives, this chapter explores the social lives and relationships of Serampore's domestic servants both within and beyond their workplace. It shows possible ways of gaining insight in individual lives, despite the methodological challenges of working primarily with colonial records that provide only indirect access to servants.

On a global level, the last few decades have witnessed an increasing number of historical studies on domestic servants.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>6</sup> The remaining records from Serampore's Danish administration were either brought to Copenhagen, where they are found today in the Danish National Archives (DNA), or destroyed.

<sup>7</sup> Raffaella Sarti offers the best summary of it. Raffaella Sarti, 'Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work', *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314.

interest in subaltern perspectives that have influenced much research on South Asia and placed marginal social groups in the centre of investigations, studies dealing directly with the social lives of servants on the Indian subcontinent are still scarce. This is not to say that servants are completely absent in the historiography of South Asia, but when they have been included in studies, it has mainly been to illuminate other matters and not as objectives in themselves. Scholars on bonded labour have, for instance, touched upon the topic due to the fluidity that often existed between servants and enslaved domestic workers.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on British colonial laws and regulations of the domestic sphere, others have looked at the legal framework that influenced the lives of servants in both European and indigenous households.<sup>9</sup> Following this interest in families, private space and gender perspectives, it has been demonstrated how British colonial homes functioned as important 'units of civilisation', closely intertwined in the exercise of imperial power.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the colonial home can be understood as a microcosm of the Empire, which places domestic servants as central subjects of a larger civilising mission. Perhaps the most comprehensive study of such a household is found in Peter Robb's work on the British surveyor and architect Richard

<sup>8</sup> Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds, *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Margot Finn, 'Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, c. 1780–1830', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19, 2009, 181–203; Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Durba Ghosh, 'Household Crimes and Domestic Order: Keeping the Peace in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1770–c. 1840', *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3, 2004, 599–623; Radhika Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the "Head of the Household", 1772–1843', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 309–43.

<sup>10</sup> Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4, 1999, 421–40; Fae Dussart, '"That Unit of Civilisation" and "The Talent Peculiar to Women": British Employers and Their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22, no. 6, 2015, 706–21; Indrani Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3, 2009, 299–308.

Blechynden, who kept a detailed diary from 1791 to 1822 when he lived in Calcutta.<sup>11</sup> Based on Blechynden's diary, Robb gives a vivid description of the daily intimacies and conflicts in a typical European home, hereunder information of a number of individual servants.

Nonetheless, irrespective of the differences in approaches, the one aspect all the above-mentioned studies have in common is the focus on employer–servant relationships. But while the figure of master or mistress was definitely pervasive, other types of relationships were also part of servants' everyday social interactions and experiences. By looking at a wider range of relationships, both at households and outside, we can better position ourselves to avoid any essentialisation of servants either as solely oppressed subjects completely shaped by the rules and diktats of their masters (and law) or as ever-active agents of their destiny. As discussed in this volume, domestic servants have often fallen between categories such as workers, bonded labourers and members of the employer's household, but disregarding their legal status and how they were perceived in society, their lives consisted of more than serving a master.<sup>12</sup> Many had their own households and families to take care of and despite often possessing limited means, they were able to socialise in different ways. I argue here that rather than treating the employer–servant relationship as the single defining structure of servant lives, we need to broaden the approach if we are to understand the history of servants better. These other relationships unfolded both within and beyond the household and were not always immediately accessible to the employer's eyes. Therefore, this chapter does not limit itself to the boundaries of the workplace but instead keeps servants at the centre of the study and follows them to various other spatial sites such as bazaars and gambling houses.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Robb, *Sex and Sensibility: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Robb, *Useful Friendship: Europeans and Indians in Early Calcutta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). On Blechynden's servants, see especially Robb, *Sentiment and Self*, chs 3 and 4.

<sup>12</sup> I wish to thank the organisers Olivia Robinson and Sacha Hepburn as well as the participants of the conference 'Beyond the Home—New Histories of Domestic Servants', Oxford, 7–8 September 2017, for inspiring discussions on how to include activities taking place beyond the workplace in the writings of servants' histories.

In doing so, I draw inspiration from the classic ethnographic technique defined by George Marcus as 'to follow the people'.<sup>13</sup> However, working with historical documents as the key source of information, rather than with interviews and participant observations, raises other methodological challenges. Nineteenth-century servants—whether European or Indian—have rarely left letters, diaries or memoirs of their own, and historians generally depend on the narratives and correspondences of the masters and mistresses. These are primarily occupied with life within the household and the 'hidden' relations that existed beyond the employer–servant relationship are therefore difficult to reconstruct on this basis alone. To follow servants beyond the workplace, we therefore need to combine the masters' narratives with other types of sources. Censuses—also used in this study—can be helpful in establishing overall patterns and structures, but to move closer to the smaller scale, judicial court records are particularly useful sources because they contain fragments of individual servants' lives. Read carefully, the court cases from Serampore reveal bits of information on the daily lives and struggles of a number of domestic workers; clues on intra-servant hierarchies and conflicts, theft, sexual relationships, friendships and leisure activities that evolved both in private and public spaces. Moreover, by looking at the ways servants argued and defended themselves in court, the cases open up for an understanding of their knowledge of existing laws and practices, in other words, their legal consciousness.

Methodologically, however, the fragmented nature of the records makes it difficult to construct full life stories or biographies of individual domestic workers. Servants pop up here and there, but they tend to disappear again just as randomly, and the archives are generally silent about many types of common daily life experiences. That said, this methodological problem is not unique to servants in colonial South Asia but applies to the great majority of people living in the early modern world. This basic premise means that the available sources need to be approached critically to shift the perspective from the inherent dominant narrative. To achieve this, it is crucial to understand the situation the sources were produced in.

<sup>13</sup> George E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 1995, 95–117.



First, the archives from Serampore were originally created by the Danish colonial administration for the purpose of keeping order in town as effectively as possible with a minimum of resources.<sup>14</sup> In order to minimise bureaucracy, only what was considered to be most necessary for the case was written down and the court proceedings do not include the primary ‘voices’ of the interrogated but consist merely of the judge’s summaries of their statements. Thus, the proceedings are highly normative and biased because the cases had already been concluded when they were written down. Second, the records only give access to the persons who crossed the line and were prosecuted in court, which raises questions of their representativeness. Most of the criminal cases involving servants thus relate to European households, although these constituted a minority in Serampore. Indian employers—especially from the upper class—on the other hand were reluctant to involve the Danish legal system in cases about their servants, probably because they feared that public exposure would jeopardise the dignity of the family if they were asked to testify in court.<sup>15</sup> While the civil court is full of suits between Indians, the relative absence in the criminal court of servants working in Indian households suggests that Indian families solved domestic problems in privacy.

Despite these limitations, the Danish court records open up to information on individual lives that is not found elsewhere. As argued by Elizabeth Kolsky, the courtroom can be viewed as ‘a site of exchange and interaction, a place where subject populations could sometimes speak truth to power’.<sup>16</sup> Whether servants also spoke *the* truth in court is a different question and one that lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> For general discussions on colonial archives as technologies of ruling, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Based on cases from the Northern Provinces in the same period, Radhika Singha has shown that the Indian elite was generally reluctant to share information on domestic matters with the colonial administration; Singha, ‘Making the Domestic More Domestic’, 315, 329. Similar to Singha’s examples from British India, Indian upper-class families in Serampore also refused to let their women register in the official census (DNA, Rentekammeret, Danske Afdeling, Tabelkommissionen: Folketælling, Frederiksnagore [Chamber of Finance, Danish Department, The Commission for the Collection of Statistical Tables, Serampore census], 1840).

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘Introduction’, *Law and History Review* 28, no. 4, 2010, 973–78.

When referring to criminality and criminal acts, I am therefore following the definitions and classifications found in the contemporary sources without attempting to discuss the moral implications of these. Obviously, the colonial government was in the privileged position of being able to both define and judge what was criminal, but—in the words of Carlo Ginzburg—historians should avoid the temptation of disguising as judges and ‘try to reenact the trials of the past.’<sup>17</sup> Building on this tradition of reading court records against the grain, this chapter illuminates the lives of domestic servants from diverse perspectives. It starts by defining Serampore’s servants and outlining the legal and structural frame under which they worked in the Danish colonial settlement, then moves on to investigate their lives within the employer’s household, and finally shifts attention to the different relationships and social activities that unfolded in spatial sites beyond the workplace.

## DEFINING SERAMPORE’S DOMESTIC SERVANTS

Serampore was established as a Danish trading post in 1755 under the official name Frederiksnagore. Formally, the settlement was administered under the government of Tranquebar, the main Danish settlement in India located in present-day Tamil Nadu, but because of the vast distance, the local town council possessed a large degree of autonomy.<sup>18</sup> In comparison to nearby British Calcutta, Serampore was a minor provincial settlement but with more than 10,000 inhabitants in the early nineteenth century, it was nonetheless counted as one of the largest towns within the Danish-Norwegian monarchy. Workers, craftsmen, missionaries and merchants were attracted by the opportunities in Serampore and, similar to Calcutta and other European trading posts along the Hooghly River, the settlement became a multi-ethnic and multi-religious town. In fact, ethnic Danes

<sup>17</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian’, *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1, 1991, 90.

<sup>18</sup> For studies on Tranquebar, see Esther Fihl and A. R. Venkatachalapathy, eds, *Beyond Tranquebar: Grappling across Cultural Borders in South India* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2014); Esther Fihl, ed., *The Governor’s Residence in Tranquebar: The House and the Daily Life of Its People, 1770–1845* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2017).

constituted a small minority of only 20–30 individuals and the European community was never larger than a few 100 people.

Similar to Calcutta, the urban growth and economic development in Serampore generated a demand for domestic service. In 1840, a census of the total population was carried out and it shows a large number of servants, categorised under different names such as ayahs (maids and nurses), bearers, *chowkidars* (watchmen), cooks, coolies, concubines, durwans, *khansamans* (house stewards), *khidmutgars* (waiters/table attendants), *malis* (gardeners), *sircars* (accountants), syces, washermen/women and water-bearers.<sup>19</sup> In total, the census contains 10,258 individuals in 2,420 households and includes the following information for each person: name, sex, caste, age, marital status, religion, profession and relative state in the family.<sup>20</sup> As the different names and subcategories suggest, servants did not form a homogenous group. Work tasks and salaries were dissimilar, but perhaps more influential was the way they lived. In this regard, the domestic servants found in the census can broadly be divided into two groups: (1) servants who lived and worked in the household of their employer and (2) servants who had their own independent homes and provided regular domestic service to other households. The two different situations obviously influenced the employer's possibilities of controlling the employee and thereby the degree of freedom an individual servant experienced.

Although most categories of servants are found in both of these groups, a quantitative analysis of the census reveals certain patterns.<sup>21</sup> Syces and ayahs lived, for instance, mainly in the household of their employer, who was generally a European. Durwans, maidservants and a category simply termed 'servants' also resided in their employer's home, but they were concentrated in relatively few wealthy families of European or Bengali origin. Among the domestic workers who lived independently, bearers and coolies (if we consider them as providers of regular domestic service)

<sup>19</sup> DNA, Serampore census, 1840.

<sup>20</sup> Apart from this, some farmland called Pearapore, situated one-and-a-half miles from Serampore, was under Danish jurisdiction. The inhabitants of Pearapore were counted in a separate census and are not included in the mentioned figures.

<sup>21</sup> The following conclusions are based on a count of all domestic workers and the sizes of their households.

constituted the largest number, but many cooks and malis also had their own households. Washermen were likewise independent and must have provided service to several different households. Similarly, sircars, with a few exceptions, also lived independently with their own families. One-half of the khansamans lived in the households of a few wealthy Indian merchants and landowners, where they were probably involved in the family business, and the other half had private homes. The independent sircars and khansamans in several ways stand out from the other domestics. Judging from the sizes of their households, they were quite wealthy and some even had engaged their own servants. They were, in other words, both servants and employers.

At the other end of the spectrum and living and working under very different conditions, we find a group of 'house slaves'. Export of slaves was officially abolished in 1745 in the Danish settlements in India but one could hereafter still legally purchase slaves for 'domestic use'.<sup>22</sup> Domestic slavery persisted therefore, and in 1790 it was not remarkable to find the 'slave girl Rosetta' living in the household of the Danish governor in Tranquebar.<sup>23</sup> The official census from 1840 does not make use of the category 'slave', but we can see from other sources that bonded domestic labour still existed in nineteenth-century Serampore, although the practice was in decline. In a will from 1841, the Catholic Mrs Hannah Measures, for instance, bequeathed Rupees 100 to her 'servant girl Maria D' Rozario commonly called Dominga'.<sup>24</sup> The amount was to be administered by Mrs Stoppard, who should also inherit Dominga as well as her 'offspring' Paul. Dominga is referred to as 'servant girl' in the will and 'ayah' in the census, but there is no doubt that she and her son were legally owned like any other property.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kay Larsen, 'Danmark og Slavehandelens Ophævelse' [Denmark and the Abolition of the Slave Trade], *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Historical Journal] 10, no. 4, 1937, 106–08.

<sup>23</sup> DNA, Det kgl. ostindiske Guvernement [The Royal East India Government], 1447A-1447B, Mandtal over Indbyggerne i Tranquebar og Landsbyerne [Census of Tranquebar and Its Villages], 1790. On the life of Rosetta, see Louise Sebro, 'Everyday Life between Private and Public: Governor Families and Their Servants', in *The Governor's Residence in Tranquebar*.

<sup>24</sup> WBSA, DR 70, Registry books.

<sup>25</sup> DNA, Serampore census, 1840.

As demonstrated by Margot Finn in a study of Anglo-Indian families in British India, the distinction between enslaved and free servants was often—deliberately or unintentionally—obscured by the employer/owner.<sup>26</sup> By the nineteenth century, it was no longer considered appropriate to own a ‘slave’, but the practice nonetheless still persisted under new names. Although domestic servants and slaves lived and worked closely together, there was a crucial difference between their respective possibilities of shaping their own lives. Servants were free to resign and leave their service—provided they had given the required notice—whereas domestic slaves were considered the legal property of the head of the household and were liable to be transferred or sold in public auction, depending on the owner’s will.<sup>27</sup> The differences between independent khansamans and bonded ayahs illustrate the problem of defining ‘domestic servants’. When referring to servants in this chapter, I therefore follow a very broad definition: workers (bonded or free) who served in or provided service to a private household.

## THE DANISH COLONIAL FRAMEWORK

Upon first arriving in India, many Danes, in line with other Europeans, were struck by the great number of servants they met. Judging from contemporary statistical material, there was probably not much variation in the proportions of servants in Denmark and India respectively, but the way servants were used by European and Indian elites to state their status in public displays contributed to the impression of extravagance.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Finn, ‘Slaves Out of Context’. For other studies on slavery in British India, see Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law*; Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History*; Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*.

<sup>27</sup> Finn, ‘Slaves Out of Context’, 187.

<sup>28</sup> In 1840, domestic servants constituted 10.4 per cent of the population of the Danish capital Copenhagen and 14.6 per cent of Denmark’s total population (*Befolkningsforholdene i Danmark i det 19. Aarhundrede* [The Population of Denmark in the 19th Century], Statistisk Tabelværk [Statistical figures], 5, Litra A No. 5 (Copenhagen: Statens Statistiske Bureau [Statistics Denmark], 1905), 171–72). Due to differences in categories and ways of counting, the census from Serampore cannot be immediately compared with the census from Denmark. However, an estimate including the different categories as well as coolies and washermen shows that domestic servants constituted approximately 13.5 per cent of Serampore’s total population.

For instance, one of the wealthiest Indians in Serampore, the merchant and landowner Raghuram Goswami, had 50 servants in his household. And in the house of an equally influential merchant, Rajkrishno Dey, 49 servants were recorded in the census. Serampore's Danish doctor, Joachim Otto Voigt, most likely referred to these families when he described the sight of the local rich *babus* on their evening promenade, surrounded by servants in deep admiration and subservience.<sup>29</sup>

The number of specialised servants in one's household was definitely an important marker of social status. To Europeans, keeping domestic servants was therefore also a method of establishing themselves as members of the ruling class. Yet, being white did not necessarily mean being rich. A large number of Europeans in India were in fact underprivileged and had to struggle to keep up a reasonable standard of living.<sup>30</sup> Although lacking the financial means, many would still feel obliged to keep a number of servants in order to demonstrate their social position to both Indians and fellow Europeans.<sup>31</sup> Even to the leading Danish civil officers in Serampore, the expenses for keeping the expected domestics were a substantial burden. The Danish secretary and judge in Serampore, Frederik Emil Elberling, who arrived in Serampore in 1835, recalled in his memoirs his initial reluctance to adapt to Anglo-Indian customs:

Tiemroth [a Danish civil officer serving in Serampore] claimed that it was absolutely necessary for me to employ a number of different servants. After countless objections, I finally ended up employing five people; a khansama with 6 Rixdaler [Danish currency] monthly, a cook with 6, a *maitre* [waiter] with 3½, a washerman with 3, a mali with 3½—in total an expenditure of 22 Rixdaler. I did not wish to acquire a palanquin or a horse as I thought I could manage well with my legs and an umbrella when going out during the day. But already the following month I had to acquire a

<sup>29</sup> Joachim Otto Voigt, 'Medicinsk Topographisk Beskrivelse af det Danske Etablissement Frederiksnagor (Serampore) og Bemærkninger om de der herskende Sygdomme' [A Medical Topographical Description of the Danish Settlement Frederiksnagor (Serampore) with Remarks on the Prevailing Diseases], *Bibliotek for Læger* [Library for Doctors] 18, 1833, 28–29.

<sup>30</sup> See Harald Fisher-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Dussart, 'That Unit of Civilisation', 710–11.

horse with a syce and a hay driver with 9 Rixdaler on the advice from the doctor and others. After this, my total expenses to domestics as a single person were 44 Rixdaler or almost half of my first salary.<sup>32</sup>

Although being critical, Elberling eventually followed the advice from more experienced colleagues and hired a number of servants, hereby displaying himself as a respectable representative of the Danish government. His decision to acquire a horse was influenced by Dr J. O. Voigt who, like his contemporary British colleagues, was occupied with the task of improving the depressing mortality rates for Europeans in India. In 1833, Voigt published a medical topography of Serampore in which he gave a description of the many health hazards one had to overcome, including extreme weather, dangerous miasma and unhygienic streets.<sup>33</sup> Voigt believed that Europeans needed to adapt slowly to the foreign climate by taking certain precautions such as adjusting the diet and clothing, and he claimed that much illnesses were caused by a general reluctance to change old habits. However, there were limits to the adaptation and in an increasingly racialised nineteenth century, the prevalent medical theories emphasised the physiological differences between Europeans and 'natives'. Physical work and exercise in the tropics were, for instance, considered harmful to European constitutions and were to be avoided. The fear of falling ill thus influenced the decisions to hire servants that could help with all types of manual work and transportation.

We know unfortunately little about the process of recruiting and how the actual negotiations of wages and work conditions took place in Serampore. According to Danish law, until 1854 servants were allowed to change position only twice a year, under the condition that they had given prior notice and obtained the necessary permission.<sup>34</sup> In eighteenth-century Tranquebar, a similar but less strict rule functioned, which made

<sup>32</sup> The National Museum of Denmark (NMD), Memoirs of Frederik Emil Elberling. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>33</sup> Voigt, 'Medicinsk Topographisk Beskrivelse af Serampore' 18, 1833, 1–66; 19, 1833, 1–39; 20, 1834, 281–359.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview of the different laws and orders that regulated domestic servants in mainland Denmark, see Anette Faye Jacobsen, *Husbondret: Rettighedskulturer i Danmark 1750–1920* [Master's Rights. Rights Cultures in Denmark, 1750–1920] (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008).

it possible to shift workplace each quarter.<sup>35</sup> In 1785, the Danish colonial government of Tranquebar found it necessary to implement further regulation because it had become a problem that 'domestic servants abandon their service on the quarter day without prior notice and hereby leave their masters in difficulties of hiring new servants'.<sup>36</sup> The new regulation made it mandatory for servants wishing to leave to give notice before the 15th of the last month before the quarter day. If they failed to do so, they had to pay a fine to the government and repay one month's salary to their employer. If they were not willing to pay or incapable of paying, they would be punished corporally. Although intended to control servants, the 1785 regulation also mentions certain responsibilities of the employer: 'any inhabitant of this place is obliged to give the same notice in cases of dismissal or, if failing to do so, cannot claim back the advance paid for the following quarter'.<sup>37</sup> The last sentence suggests that servants in Tranquebar were paid in advance every three months and overall the local colonial servant laws secured better and more flexible working conditions than in Denmark. However, it is not clear whether the regulations from Tranquebar were also implemented and valid in Serampore.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Danish colonial administration was, like its British counterpart, reluctant to intervene in what were considered as private spheres or purely indigenous matters. In 1777, the Danish Crown took over the settlements from the Danish East India Company and a few years later the judicial system was reformed with the aim of improving the 'rights and justice ... for every European, Indian, inhabitant or stranger, regardless of nation, religion or rank'.<sup>38</sup> In practice, this meant that the Danish administration thought it necessary to maintain a plural legal system; one court for Europeans and another for Indians. In Tranquebar the indigenous civil court was known as *sorteretten* (the Black Court) and the equivalent in Serampore was called the *catchery*,

<sup>35</sup> Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai, Danish Records, vol. 13039/3, Publication Book (15.02.1779–15.07.1824), Regulation dated 17.02.1785.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> DNA, Kommercekollegiet, Ostindiske sekretariat 1777–1797 [[Chamber of Commerce, East India Secretariat 1777–1797], 925, Judicial Regulations, 8 January 1781. Author's translation from the Danish.



a Danish variation of the Hindi word *kutcherry*. Whereas all civil cases involving Europeans would be taken to the European court and judged under Danish law, 'pure' Indian cases were referred to the catchery court where they were to be settled by arbitration led by a Hindu pundit or a Muslim mullah, according to the religion of the involved persons. All criminal cases, however, were subject to common Danish law regardless of one's ethnic or religious background.

During the eighteenth century, the Danish reluctance to interfere with the Indian social order meant that most civil cases were solved in arbitration. However, an increasing number of unsettled suits and appeals were brought forward to the Danish judge, and it gradually became clear to the administrators that the government could not avoid taking direct responsibility for the Indian population.<sup>39</sup> From the 1820s, this development is reflected in a number of judicial reforms, which positioned the colonial administration in a central role. In Serampore, the judicial regulations from 1823, for instance, appointed a Danish judge to preside over the catchery court.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, a number of local police regulations that clearly challenged the boundary between private and public spaces were enforced.<sup>41</sup>

Concerning domestic servants, one of the regulations was rather unusual; according to judge Elberling, 'a master was prohibited to punish his servants for any offence committed'.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, a written example of the actual decree does not seem to have survived among the Danish

<sup>39</sup> For examples from Tranquebar, see Niels Brimnes, *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India* (London: Curzon Press, 1999). For a study on the change in Danish policies of colonial rule in India, see Kristoffer Edelgaard Christensen, 'Comparing the Colonial State: Governing "the Social" and Policing the Population in Late 18th Century India and Denmark', in *Rethinking the Colonial State* (Political Power and Social Theory, vol. 33), ed. Søren Rud and Søren Ivarsson (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 47–79.

<sup>40</sup> DNA: General-Toldkammer- og Kommercekollegiet, Indisk kontor, journalsager (The Board of Customs and Trade, East India, journal files), volume 3270.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Rastén, 'Serampore i Briternes Skygge 1808–45' [Overshadowed by the British: Serampore 1808–45], in *Indien: Tranquebar, Serampore og Nicobarerne (Danmark og Kolonierne)* [India: Tranquebar, Serampore and the Nicobar Islands (Denmark and the Colonies)], ed. Niels Brimnes (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2017), 298–333.

<sup>42</sup> NMD, Memoirs of Frederik Emil Elberling. Author's translation from the Danish.

records and further details such as the terminology and the intentions behind are therefore not available. Nonetheless, Elberling served as judge and showed a keen interest in Indian law and we may assume that he was well acquainted with the local rules and practices.<sup>43</sup> In Elberling's description of the regulation, the prohibition applied to all types of physical punishment. If this was in fact true, the regulation conflicted with the general Danish law that gave a master the right to chastise his children and servants with a stick or by birching, provided it did not cause severe injuries or health threats.<sup>44</sup> Although many alterations were made to the original Danish law from 1683, the right to corporally punish servants was in fact not removed in mainland Denmark until 1921.

The regulation was just as remarkable in the context of British India where Europeans widely used their rights to chastise servants even for the smallest causes. Although this extensive violent behaviour was criticised by some, it was generally accepted as a necessary means of keeping order in the household.<sup>45</sup> That a regulation existed on paper, of course, does not imply that private chastisement of domestics did not happen in Serampore, but the fact that hundreds of cases involving servants ended in the colonial court system suggests that it must have been in force and to a large extent respected. Instead of physically punishing a servant for disobedience, theft or neglect of duty, many employers chose to make use of the legal system and brought the cases forward to the criminal court. This did not mean that domestics would necessarily escape physical punishment. Supplementing a sentence to the jail or work in the penal institution, it was common to receive between 10 and 50 strokes with a rattan cane.

<sup>43</sup> Frederik Emil Elberling collected information on Indian law practices and later published *A Treatise on Inheritance, Gift, Will, Sale and Mortgage: With an Introduction on the Laws of the Bengal Presidency* (Serampore: Serampore Press, 1844).

<sup>44</sup> Jacobsen, *Husbondret*; Dorte Kook Lyngholm, 'Pligten til Lydighed: Tjenestefolk og Landarbejderes Retsstilling på Danske Herregårde i 1800-tallet' [Absolute Obedience. The Legal Status of Servants and Workers on Danish Estates in the 19th Century], *temp: tidsskrift for historie* [temp: Journal of History] 7, no. 13, 2016, 27–59.

<sup>45</sup> Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic', 329–31. However, some Europeans crossed the line and were prosecuted for domestic crimes; see, Ghosh, 'Household Crimes and Domestic Order'.

## NAVIGATING WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD

As the initial case between Buxoo and the durwan illustrates, life as a domestic servant could be hard and even dangerous. Rivalry and struggle for power within the household were part of everyday life and the criminal court proceedings reveal several similar cases of intra-servant conflicts. That these conflicts arose among fellow servants does not mean that the employers were completely absent. As in Buxoo's case, the strife was often provoked by the employer's wish to monitor and control the servants. This was done by appointing special trusted servants to oversee the work in the household and report any irregularities; a system that obviously created an environment of suspicion.

Domestic work was formally divided rather rigidly between different specialised servants, whose place in the social hierarchy of the household was defined mainly by the proximity to and relationship with the employer. The highest status was normally ascribed to the khansaman who worked as a house steward and head servant with the overall responsibility for running the household. Another important person was the durwan. Although physically located at a greater distance from the employer, the durwan controlled the gate and thereby held important knowledge of everyone's coming and going. A British observer described in 1843 the durwan's role in Calcutta as follows:

The *dirwan* [durwan] is one of the most important, and certainly the idlest servant of the establishment. He has a little room, or lodge, adjoining the gates of the compound, and no one should be able to enter or leave it without his knowledge. If thoroughly honest, and I never heard any just cause of complaint, he is a very efficient guardian of your property, and a check upon the irregularity of the other servants.<sup>46</sup>

Like the khansaman, the durwan could act as the employer's right hand, a role that often made him unpopular among his fellow servants. The division of work naturally influenced the hierarchies between servants, but it was nonetheless possible to challenge the given order. When Buxoo tied

<sup>46</sup> George William Johnson, *The Stranger in India; or, Three Years in Calcutta*, 2 vols, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1843), 44.

up the durwan in the stable, he clearly transgressed the servant hierarchy. Despite being a stable attendant, who was usually considered to be low in the hierarchy of the household, he demonstrated his unacceptability to the durwan's control. Lying away from the living quarters, the stable was one of the few places that could have provided a private setting to the servants and this was Buxoo's space.

Servants were an integral part of the household, whether living within the employer's premises or visiting daily to provide their service. As demonstrated by Swati Chattopadhyay in her study of the colonial architecture in Calcutta, the European villas of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not have separate domains for servants and residents. This lack of defined boundaries within the house contributed to the prevalent negative European representations of domestics as being a nuisance more than a help.<sup>47</sup> Navigating through this intimate space while appearing non-intrusive was not an easy task, which is why experienced servants who understood their roles and duties were in great demand. Fae Dussart has noted that British households in colonial India functioned as smaller units in a larger imperial mission and has shown how British women regarded it as a special duty to 'civilise' their Indian domestics by teaching them about British culture and customs.<sup>48</sup> It must be added to this that an element of upbringing in dealing with domestics was not exclusively confined to European households. Most servants in India came from the lower social strata and to serve in a middle- or upper-class brahman family correspondingly involved knowing a set of religious and social rules they were not necessarily familiar with.<sup>49</sup>

Whether working for Indians or Europeans, a servant could easily get involved in conflicts within the home. In 1834, several domestic servants

<sup>47</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, 'Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of "White Town" in Colonial Calcutta', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 2, 2000, 154–79.

<sup>48</sup> Dussart, 'That Unit of Civilisation'.

<sup>49</sup> See Swapna M. Banerjee, 'Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives of Colonial Bengal', *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3, 2004, 681–708; Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

were forced to choose sides when they were caught in an episode of marital violence in a European household in Serampore. In the criminal court, James Blechynden was accused of having 'hit his wife with a heavy window pole, causing a serious wound behind her left ear.'<sup>50</sup> James was the illegitimate son of Richard Blechynden and, as Peter Robb's work shows, this was not the first time he made trouble or acted violently.<sup>51</sup> James had earlier flogged and beaten up his servants, and as a young man, his general conduct had often caused his father great concern.

Before the attack, Mrs Blechynden had visited her uncle in Calcutta with whom James believed she had an affair, and when she returned to Serampore in the evening, she found the main gate locked. When James refused to let her into the house, she ordered one of the servants who had accompanied her to climb through a window and open the gate. On noticing this attempt, her husband attacked the servant with a stone and drove him out of the house again. In the meantime, a tailor who was working in the house opened the gate and Mrs Blechynden entered. The couple started arguing and when James got even more upset, Mrs Blechynden ordered the present servants to hold him down. Trying to avoid this, James turned his anger towards the servants and began striking them so they had to flee and get assistance from the police. The police officers arrived just in time to see James grab a window pole and knock down his wife. In the subsequent court case, James claimed that he had hit his wife by accident when trying to defend himself against the attacking servants, thereby shifting focus to the usual suspects. However, the fact that James had earlier spent a year in a mental hospital in Calcutta spoke against him. So did the severity of his attack, which the examining doctor argued could easily have caused the death of his wife. James Blechynden was therefore sentenced to four weeks in jail, while all servants escaped further charges.

In a similar case about loyalty, a servant in an Indian household was put in a difficult situation. One evening in 1834, when the sircar Shreedhor Bundopadhya was running an errand in Serampore for his employer, he was suddenly attacked and dragged into a house.<sup>52</sup> The assailant appeared

<sup>50</sup> WBSA, DR 23. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>51</sup> On James Blechynden, see especially Chapter 6 in Robb, *Sentiment and Self*.

<sup>52</sup> WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 46/1834.

to be Sibnarain Bysack, a brother of Shreedhor's employer, Ramnarain Bysack. In court, the unfortunate Shreedhor explained that he had been locked into a room where Sibnarain had threatened to beat him up and ordered his durwan to use his sword against him, which was only prevented by the arrival of the police. All the involved persons were then brought to the catchery to give their testimonies. Consequently, it was revealed that the misdemeanour was related to an ongoing civil court case between the two brothers. Shreedhor, who had earlier served Sibnarain Bysack, had been called to testify but failed to appear. As it was a duty to testify when called upon by the court, Sibnarain defended himself by stating that he had only intended to help the police by escorting Shreedhor to the catchery. The judge, however, found it suspicious that Sibnarain had kept Shreedhor locked up for more than an hour when he could easily have brought him directly to the catchery, which was situated less than 10 minutes from his house. This suggested that Sibnarain had sought to influence a key witness by the use of force. Shreedhor, on the other hand, admitted that he had tried to avoid the court by hiding in his house because he feared his testimony would harm his present employer. Even though Shreedhor could actually have been punished for not appearing in the court, the judge seemed to understand his difficult position and instead sentenced the Bysack brothers a fine each; Sibnarain for trying to influence a witness and Ramnarain for not bringing his servant to the court and thereby failing to live up to his responsibility as the head of the household.<sup>53</sup>

Attempting to avoid being drawn into the conflict between his former and present masters, Shreedhor simply chose to disappear; a strategy that proved to be successful. This, however, was not a possible option for the domestics in the household of Blechynden, who were forced to choose sides in a marital conflict and consequently ended up attacking their rightful master. The durwan was almost beaten up by Buxoo, most likely because he was simply trying to keep an eye on the stable as he had been ordered to by his employer. Navigating within the household was difficult and servants were often caught in conflicts where they had to choose between being loyal to the employer or to a fellow servant. To assume

<sup>53</sup> On the obligations and rights of the head of the household in British India, see Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic'.

that there existed a given alliance between servants is to take for granted that servants naturally felt part of the same (class-conscious) group. But while friendships and solidarity between servants were of course possible, the hierarchical structures within the employer's household stimulated internal competition, which could easily lead to hostility.

## LOVE AND LEISURE: GAMBLING, DRINKING AND FRATERNISATION

Considering the subordinate character of their employment, domestic servants in Serampore possessed a relatively large degree of freedom, allowing them to retain a well-developed network across the town. The servants who had their own independent households were of course under less control of their employer, but the ones who resided at their workplace were also able to leave daily and meet in each other's houses or at the bazaar. Some even lived in quasi-marital relationships with other servants of neighbouring households.<sup>54</sup> These types of relations were usually accepted by the employers, who benefitted by receiving the latest news and gossip from the town through their servants. This was especially important to European women, whose access to the outside society was restrained by the prevalent cultural norms. For them, domestics functioned as informants, cultural brokers and valuable links to the Indian world.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, while some of the servants' contacts could be useful to the employer, others posed a threat not only to the individual household but also to the public order. Many of these relationships were centred on gambling houses in Serampore. According to a royal Danish order from 1753, betting of money on chance-based games played with cards, dices or similar was illegal.<sup>56</sup> The prohibition applied to taverns, public and private houses, and the King's intent was, 'out of love and paternal care',

<sup>54</sup> WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 113/1833.

<sup>55</sup> Nupur Chaudhury, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India,' *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4, 1994, 550.

<sup>56</sup> Royal order, 6.10.1753 (O. A. Borum, H. Jacobi and Poul Plate, eds, *Dansk Lovsamling 1665–1890* [Danish Session Laws 1665–1890], vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1930), 26–29.

to protect weak citizens from wasting their earnings.<sup>57</sup> The regulation also covered Serampore and therefore gambling was practised in secret in private houses. The police sometimes revealed these hideaways and thanks to the subsequent court cases, it is possible to shed some light on the different activities that unfolded there.

Gambling normally took place among small groups of people who met in private homes, usually under cover of the night. In some cases, the gambling houses were managed by women, for example a widow seeking an alternative income, but the players and visitors were exclusively men. The houses functioned as meeting places for many different people and were frequented by Europeans, Indo-Portuguese and Indians, who all had one thing in common: they came from the lower social strata. However, judging from the court cases, domestic servants seem to have been particularly active customers of these illicit places. They sometimes gambled together with fellow servants in the houses where they worked, but as this involved a large risk of being caught, it was more common to meet outside the employer's household.

In 1835, a gambling house run by Mony Mussulman was brought to the notice of the police and Mony was arrested along with six other people.<sup>58</sup> When the police arrived at Mony's home, four people were playing and drinking while two others were acting as watchmen. Having seen the police approaching, the companions turned out the light and escaped through a backdoor, but soon after they were all captured. The captives had been playing a dice game called *jurmist* and several coins were found on the table. As payment for hosting the gamblers, Mony received money for purchasing luxury commodities such as oil, tobacco and cake. In order to sentence the accused, the judge needed to demonstrate in court that the game they had played was completely based on chance. From this and similar cases we therefore know the rules of some of the popular games, as these were recorded in detail in the proceedings. Especially, a game played with cowries (sea shells) and known in the Danish sources as *soloi* was widespread.<sup>59</sup> The purpose was to predict how many shells would

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>58</sup> WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 129/1835.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Faujdary, no. 122/1834.



land with the open side upwards when thrown by one of the players. The person who had chosen the right number would then win all the bets. In another popular game, known in the sources as *jorbitjur*, a person placed an amount of stones in the fist and the fellow player then had to guess if the number of stones was equal or unequal.<sup>60</sup>

Mony was eventually charged for 'running a late night gambling house for several young people, including some domestic servants'.<sup>61</sup> Two of the persons arrested were only 13 years old. In his final sentence, the judge pointed out that Mony's offence was aggravated by her role in ruining the morality of two underage boys. The paternalistic thoughts that characterised the original prohibition from 1753 were thus still important. The colonial government viewed gambling as a threat that could potentially undermine the moral fabric of the society and the gambling houses were seen as centres of various activities that threatened the established order of Serampore. A lucky bet could provide the winner with new possibilities, but losing a game, on the other hand, could result in devastating debts, forcing the unfortunate person to seek alternative incomes. Being a domestic servant with a low salary, the opportunities to solve situations like this were limited and the most obvious solution was to steal from the employer's household.

Sometimes the division between a gambling house and a brothel was fluid. But in contrast to gambling, prostitution was not considered a legal offence, and in the 1840 census, prostitutes—162 in total—are listed in line with any other occupation. Winning a game of *soloi*—or stealing from the employer—could mean a rare chance for a domestic servant to visit a brothel. For instance, in 1824, when Aglu Musselman, who worked for Mr Emerique, got away with a large amount of money from his employer's house, the first thing he did was to seek out a prostitute with whom he could spend the night.<sup>62</sup> Others were more inventive in their attempts to find female company. In his memoirs, Elberling recalls how his khansaman Kadir once creatively managed to seduce a young Muslim girl from Serampore: Under the pretext of seeking a *maitresse* (concubine)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Faujdary, no. 73/1833.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Faujdary, no. 129/1835. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>62</sup> WBSA, DR 20, Faujdary, no. 46/1824.

for Elberling, Kadir had found a girl and made an agreement with her mother. When the mother went to purchase some cakes at the bazaar in order to celebrate the newly established contract, Kadir used the time effectively and seduced the daughter. When the act was revealed, Kadir was prosecuted at the criminal court where he had to defend himself before the judge Elberling, who awkwardly also happened to be his employer.<sup>63</sup> As the actual court proceedings are missing from the records, we know the story only from Elberling's personal memoirs. According to Elberling, Kadir admitted during the trial that he had never received an order from his employer but simply made up the story as an excuse to gain access to the girl, whose beauty was well-known in the town.

Kadir was consequently sentenced to imprisonment. His main crime was not that he had seduced (or perhaps raped) a young girl and ruined her family's reputation, but rather that he had used his employer's name to his own advantage. This was not only a breach of confidence but potentially also harmed Elberling's integrity as the head of the household, as he was supposed to be capable of controlling his own servants. The fact that Elberling was the town judge and a leading figure in Serampore made the offence even worse. Kadir had served several of the principal Danish citizens in Serampore for many years, first as a cook and later as a khansaman, and hereby climbed the social ladder. The case is therefore also an example of how domestic servants could gain personal advantages by benefiting from their master's position in society. This was accepted as long as it did not directly affect the employer.

Whether based on paternalistic ideas of saving weak souls or pragmatic attempts to reduce crime, the Danish administration endeavoured to put an end to the illegal gambling houses. Sometimes the houses were easy to locate and identify because of the accompanying forms of sociability; the combination of alcohol and gambling led to arguments and fights, which attracted attention from the neighbours. But the police also worked more systematically and put suspects under long-time surveillance and collected evidence before they decided to raid a gambling house. Nonetheless, the risk of being revealed and eventually punished was not enough to prevent people from taking part in the illegal activities, because the gambling

<sup>63</sup> NMD, *Memoirs of Frederik Emil Elberling*.

houses held important functions to the users. If we look at the houses from the perspective of domestic servants and others from the lower social strata of society, they were places for socialising, laughing, making friends and maybe exchanging experiences of working conditions, and they were centres of entertainment and leisure, which, apart from gambling, included drinking, smoking and even sexual relations.

## CHARGE AND COUNTERCHARGE

Living and working as a domestic servant in Serampore involved many risks and temptations and one could easily end up in the criminal court, either as witness or accused. Figures from the earliest remaining volumes of sentences from the catchery court, covering the years 1823 to 1826, show that out of 50 criminal cases, domestic servants were involved in 20.<sup>64</sup> Ten years later, the same pattern is found with servants represented in 17 out of 51 criminal cases.<sup>65</sup> Overall, this suggests that domestics were involved in nearly 40 per cent of all criminal cases (see Table 6.1).

TABLE 6.1: Criminal Court Cases with Accused Domestic Servants\*

<i>Charges</i>	<i>1823–26</i>	<i>1833–35</i>
Fraud and theft from employer**	17	10
Theft from others	2	
Violence		2
Gambling		3
Handling stolen goods		1
False testimony/not showing up in court	1	1
Total cases with domestic servants	20	17
Total cases	50	51

*Notes:* \*The table shows court cases where domestic servants were under accusation. Some of these cases included several servants, but each of these cases has been counted as one and listed here accordingly. Therefore, the table does not indicate the actual number of servants involved in criminal cases.

\*\* Includes cases where the accused servants left service without prior notice and took away with them valuables from the employer's household.

<sup>64</sup> WBSA, DR 20. The pages covering 1823 are only partly readable.

<sup>65</sup> WBSA, DR 23.

Among the court cases involving servants, the most extraordinary from this period was a case about a large burglary gang consisting of more than 30 people.<sup>66</sup> At the court in 1835, the gang was found to be responsible for almost every burglary committed in Serampore over the past four years. According to the local *thanadar* (Indian police chief), the head of the gang, Panscowry Mootchy, was known to be a notorious thief, but still the scale of the offences came as a surprise. While most of the criminal cases in the Danish records consist merely of a few pages, the case about Panscowry's gang covers more than 50 pages and each of the offences are described in detail. The burglaries more or less followed the same pattern. First, a small group would meet in Panscowry's house to plan the act. The house was located in the British territory just outside Serampore and because of Panscowry's reputation, he was actually prohibited to cross the border. In this phase, it was important to gather detailed knowledge about potential locations. This could, for example, be information on where certain valuables were kept in the house or when the owners were away to Calcutta, leaving the home unattended; types of knowledge that were easily available to domestic servants. The gang seems to have been well prepared before committing each burglary and Panscowry afterwards paid back a part of the loot to his informants. But servants were not only functioning as informants, they were also part of the inner circle of the gang. In 1831, some cloth, a silver-coated hookah and several notes—altogether worth 700–800 rupees—were stolen from the house of a Neelmony Chatterjee. The burglary was proved to have been committed by Panscowry together with Goluck Coyburt who had earlier served Neelmony and knew where the valuables were kept and how to enter the house without being noticed by the guard.

In the court case, it was important for the judge to decide how the loot had been shared between the parties involved because the sentence was ruled according to the value of the stolen goods. As there was no doubt about Goluck's involvement, the only way to argue his case was therefore to try to downplay the size of his share. In the court interrogation, Goluck admitted having received the hookah, some of the cloth and 24 rupees in cash but denied having knowledge about several other objects. Most

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Faujdary, no. 51/1835 and DR 24, February 1836.

of the other accomplices, however, spoke against Goluck and it became his words against theirs. While Goluck claimed that Panscowry's mother had taken parts of the cloth, the others claimed that Goluck had had new clothes made for his child from the item in question. At the time of the burglary, Goluck was living together with a Sobul Dolaul in the backhouse of the rice merchant Juggernaut Delaul—who was also under charge for the handling of stolen goods—and he was making his living by finding customers to Delaul and other rice merchants from the nearby area. But although Goluck was no longer in the service of Neelmony—which would have aggravated his offence—he was still considered to have violated the trust of his former employer and this clearly influenced the judge, who found that there was 'not much reason to believe his statements'. Consequently, Goluck was sentenced to two years of public work 'in iron', 30 strikes with the rattan cane and subsequent expulsion from the Danish territory.

Goluck's case was rare in Serampore because the restricted area of the settlement generally made it difficult for this scale of organised crime to remain unnoticed by the authorities.<sup>67</sup> As shown in Table 6.1, the majority of cases involving servants was of a different kind; fiddling with the accounts, fraud, theft from the household and leaving the service without notice are typical charges found in the records. For instance, Guy Musalman, another of Elberling's servants, was charged for having purchased an old saddle at the bazaar, replaced it with a completely new one from his master's household and subsequently gone to Barrackpore to sell the latter.<sup>68</sup>

In another typical case from 1824, 25-year-old Ms Flora, who served in the house of Mr Mendes, had suddenly disappeared from her service, taking with her a silver necklace and a bracelet.<sup>69</sup> In a similar case, Ms Poran Cauranny, who served as a concubine in the house of a Lucky Borthumy,

<sup>67</sup> In contrast, in the surrounding British territories, many gangs working in similar ways existed in the same period; Sumanta Banerjee, *The Wicked City: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009); Sumanta Banerjee, 'Urban Technology and Changing Forms of Crime in Early Colonial Calcutta', *Social Scientist* 38, no. 3/4, 2010, 25–36.

<sup>68</sup> WBSA, DR 25, Faujdary, no. 116/1839.

<sup>69</sup> WBSA, DR 20, Faujdary, no. 17/1824.

abruptly left Serampore with a selection of jewellery and clothes and fled to nearby Konnagar in the British territory.<sup>70</sup> Both Flora and Cauranny were caught by the police soon after and prosecuted. Leaving the service without notice was in itself a criminal offence and the cases further raised doubt about the ownership of the items they had brought with them. However, what is interesting in this context is that they defended themselves in court with similar arguments. While Ms Flora explicitly claimed that Mr Mendes had hit her, Poran in her defence simply stated that her master had treated her badly. It is not the purpose here to speculate the actual truth of these statements, but the fact that they made it into the court proceedings demonstrates that allegations of violence and ill treatment were legitimate claims that had to be considered by the judge, even when put forward by female domestics.<sup>71</sup> By raising counter-allegations, an accused servant raised doubt about the employer's integrity and conduct. As the person's 'character' and 'vita ante acta' (the life before the act) were important factors in deciding the final verdict, any suspicion that could be raised about the employer naturally strengthened the servant's case.

In another case, one Cornelius Baptiser was accused of having left his service as khidmutgar in the house of Mrs King, taking some silverware with him. During the interrogations, it came out that Cornelius Baptiser had earlier been known under an entire list of different names: Kuxtabux, Lalloo, Junoo, John and Buxoo. His back had 'clear marks from an earlier severe corporal punishment', he was wanted for theft in the French settlement Chandernagore and he had recently disappeared with a banknote worth 25 rupees from another house where he had served.<sup>72</sup> His job as Mrs King's khidmutgar had lasted only four days, indicating that he had simply used his position to gain access to her valuables. All this of course clearly spoke against Cornelius, to use that name, and the judge concluded that there were very strong indications of his guilt.

<sup>70</sup> WBSA, DR 20, Faujdary, no. 46/1824.

<sup>71</sup> On the low status of women as witnesses, see Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', in *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009), 271–303; Ghosh, 'Household Crimes and Domestic Order'; Elizabeth Kolsky, 'The Rule of Colonial Indifference: Rape on Trial in Early Colonial India, 1805–57', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4, 2010, 1093–117.

<sup>72</sup> WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 130/1834. Author's translation from the Danish.

Nonetheless, Cornelius was set free due to lack of evidence. During the questioning, he kept denying having any knowledge of the lost silverware and although he admitted leaving his service, he claimed that he had informed his fellow servants about the decision. According to Cornelius, his leaving was triggered by the bad treatment by Mrs King who 'in the most severe manner had scolded and flogged him for breaking a glass'.<sup>73</sup> Although this was strongly denied by Mrs King, the judge was not able to find substantial evidence of any of the conflicting statements and finally had to dismiss the case.

The systematic use of similar counter-allegations found in the court cases involving domestics shows that servants in Serampore were well aware of their legal rights, particularly the regulation that prohibited physical punishment and violence. Despite the almost invisible borders and the close links between Serampore and the surrounding British territories, entering the Danish town also meant entering a different judicial system and this seems to have been well-established knowledge.<sup>74</sup> The cases further demonstrate that charges from the employer alone were not sufficient to convict a servant. Yet, the agency of the servant clearly had its limits. Independent charges against the employer were rarely raised by servants and the allegations typically came up as part of the defence in other cases. In such situations, the servant was already placed in a defensive position as the accused and not the accuser.

## CONCLUSION

Domestic servants in the Danish trading town Serampore did not form a homogeneous group. They consisted of more than a thousand individuals and spanned from bonded labourers and ayahs living in European homes to independent khansamans and sircars with own large households. Their

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

<sup>74</sup> Until 1830, Serampore's asylum laws made it possible for bankrupts to settle in the town to avoid prosecution in the British territories, but with the intention of increasing the population, the Danish colonial authorities generally turned a blind eye to other types of violations too. Simon Rastén, 'Serampore, det nye Handelscentrum 1755–1808' [Serampore: The New Trading Centre 1755–1808] in *Indien*, 246–73, and Rastén, 'Serampore i Briternes Skygge 1808–1845'.

work life and living conditions differed in various ways, which makes it difficult to make broad generalisations or even speak of servants as a category. Some challenged the hierarchies and order of the households they were working in, some stole from their masters or were involved in organised criminal networks; others lived regular lives, had their own families and even their own servants.

Irrespective of these differences, the one thing they had in common was that their social lives were not confined only to the site of the workplace. The relationship to the employer was unquestionably important and often caused conflicts, but domestic servants were part of other social networks and relationships as well. This counted both for the many servants who lived independently and the ones who resided in the home of the employer. Their social interactions stretched out beyond the workplace, and it was possible for most servants to move rather freely and socialise at the daily market or—at night—in places like Serampore's illegal gambling houses. If we are to understand the lives of domestic servants better, we need to follow them to different spatial sites and seek to unravel relationships that were often hidden to the employer.

Methodologically, it is challenging to analytically foreground these other types of relations for which the sources are scanty and fragmented. Domestic servants in early nineteenth-century India have rarely left written material behind and historians to a large extent have to rely on their employers' narratives, which—if servants are mentioned at all—deal mainly with life within the workplace. However, by supplementing these sources with information from colonial court records, it becomes possible to stitch together various small clues and gain insight into the social lives as well as legal consciousness of individual servants. Furthermore, including perspectives that are not confined to the master–servant relationship helps to avoid stereotyping and opens up to a more holistic and multi-sphered understanding of servants' history. Although being regulated by the employer and colonial laws, servants also lived their lives beyond work.





## 7

Servants and Masters in  
Eighteenth-century Surat

Readings from a Colonial Archive

LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

Conceptualising slavery and servitude especially in the South Asian context has been a daunting task. Scholars working on slavery have commented on the difficulties of capturing servitude either in the colonial or in the pre-colonial archive on account of both the logic and limits of translation as well as due to the complex layers of affective and coercive relationships that were built into myriad forms of servitude.<sup>1</sup> This chapter is, therefore, less about relationships in merchant and aristocratic establishments in late eighteenth-century India as it is about the way these were understood and categories put in place inadvertently in and by the colonial archive. It was a period when the English power was staking its rights in western India, where power was shared and seriously contested by local contestants, and as a result of which the English East India Company was hesitant about regulating social violence as rigorously as it could have. Instead it came up with tentative understandings of traditional scriptural prescriptions and contributed to the emergent discourse on servitude and its intimate dimensions. The nuances and complexities of social relations in households came to the forefront when the Company made efforts to intervene in the existing judicial apparatus and took up court cases involving servants and the miscarriages of justice they faced at the hands of their masters.

A close reading of the early judicial materials of the English East India Company, I suggest, may help us reflect on the ongoing debates about

<sup>1</sup> Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton, eds, *Slavery & South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

slavery and servitude, especially their prehistory in early colonial India, and thereby participate in what is already an exciting historiographical field.<sup>2</sup> Besides the story of local imperatives of colonial governance and expediency, the exercise could suggest important leads for understanding the construction of a very particular domestic space where servitude operated and that provided insulation against intervention. Even if the English officials did not put a visible gloss on the evidence they encountered in relation to coercion, humiliation and assaults on servants, their silence and their selective appropriation of the idea of distinguishing between law that concerned the public world and that of personal law were certainly responsible for configuring a discourse on domestic servitude.<sup>3</sup> The story runs parallel with that of slavery and its suppressed history, a subject that has been competently developed by Andrea Major.<sup>4</sup> The story of the servant is in many ways even harder to tell as it did not immediately engage the preoccupations of anti-abolitionists and therefore tended to remain buried.<sup>5</sup>

Definitions of servitude are as difficult as those of slavery in the Indian context, especially as they are imbricated in the actuality of extreme hierarchies and dependency relationships that characterise Indian society.<sup>6</sup> For practical purposes, we could well deploy Eaton's definition about slavery for servitude, signifying 'condition of uprooted outsiders, impoverished insiders—or the descendants of either serving persons or institutions on which they are wholly dependent'.<sup>7</sup> Dependency was central to the conditions of service, while loyalty and fidelity were seen as preconditions to the reinforcement of intimacy in the ties of subjugation.<sup>8</sup> It was this combination that could validate extreme humiliation and

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Radhika Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the "Head of the Household", 1772–1843', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 309–43.

<sup>4</sup> Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*.

<sup>5</sup> Margot Finn, 'Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, c. 1780–1830', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19, 2009, 181–203.

<sup>6</sup> See the chapters on Mughal and Rajputana households by Sajjad Alam Rizvi, Geetanjali Tyagi and Priyanka Khanna in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery & South Asian History*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Sunil Kumar's Interjection in this volume.

brutality of punishment that included flogging leading to death, as we shall see in our narrative. While ostensibly unlike in the case of slavery, the English were not torn by the contradictory impulses of abolishing slave trading by the Europeans and of overlooking slavery practices by natives, it would seem that in the case of domestic servitude, they were more than content to endorse the language of intimacy and trust used to justify slavery-like practices in private spaces. In any case, the employment situation in India was not even a matter of private contract or agreement between the employer and the servant—we have no evidence of a written or verbal agreement, even if we do have the suggestion of private and informal provisions for enforcement against infringement.<sup>9</sup> For the servants of the English East India Company this was not so removed from conditions prevailing in England, where, as we know from Paul Craven's and Douglas Hay's collaborative project,<sup>10</sup> the enforcement of private agreements between masters and servants was by lay justices of the peace, unsupervised by senior courts. In most cases, punishment meted out in the form of flogging and fines to workers on the excuse of misdemeanour became common practice and subsequently formalised as statutes across the world.<sup>11</sup> It would be far-fetched to conflate this with our own specific story but it is nonetheless an important point to keep in mind. To this one could well add the ubiquity of the idioms of trust and loyalty that circulated in Anglo-Indian circles both to make up a register of romantic readings of old tales of martial chivalry, honour and fidelity as well as in the language of business transactions.<sup>12</sup> Both in

<sup>9</sup> Michael Anderson, 'Work Construed: Ideological Origins of Labour Law in British India to 1918', in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, ed. Peter Robb (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87–120.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, eds, *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Also see Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Norbert Peabody, 'Tod's Rajasthan and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth Century India', *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 1, 1996, 185–220. Also see Mattison Mines, 'Courts of Law and Styles of Self in Eighteenth Century Madras: From Hybrid to Colonial Self', *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 1, 2001, 33–74.

a sense lent the ideological scaffolding for the early colonial rationale for non-intervention in domestic servitude.

The cases that this chapter presents will also try and capture some of the actual conditions in which servants lived and laboured, when they served elite establishments ranging from bankers to the dispossessed ruling class to speculate whether there were strains in master–servant relations in the period of transition, the materiality of everyday lives of those who served and waited upon masters. In some ways then this brief presentation will consider the challenges of studying a variety of social relations in the period of transition, when ties of dependency and subordination faced challenges in the wake of Mughal decline and existing networks of obligation and reciprocity affecting bankers and rulers alike came under pressure.<sup>13</sup> As a hinge between the older dispensation of Mughal rule and the emerging one under the leadership of the English Company, this period was witness to new modes of visibilisation of disputes involving retainers and agents although their classification as servants was by no means a simple exercise. The analysis of these processes will be structured around two specific cases of murder or manslaughter. One is the case of a dependent of a senior banker Tarwady Arjunji Nathji; the other is of Mansoor, a servant/retainer of Balu Mian, an important descendant of the Sidi house that enjoyed a special status in late eighteenth-century Surat and maintained limited political influence in the Sacheen area, near Surat, where he enjoyed a small fief. Each of these cases brings out the location of servants in a household, even while providing details of the social world in which servants lived, worked and died.<sup>14</sup>

Writings on the production of colonial knowledge and the assemblage of the colonial archive have referred to its limits and its discrete registers necessitating a close, critical and vigilant reading. This is especially so in the period of early colonial rule, in the century of transition when the English East India Company was beginning to get its bearings on the ground and negotiate tenuously with local society and balance its claims

<sup>13</sup> Indrani Chatterjee, ed., *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Lakshmi Subramanian, 'A Trial in Transition: Courts, Merchants and Identities in Western India, circa 1800', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 41, no. 3, 2004, 269–92.

to sovereignty and its conceptions of the same.<sup>15</sup> Predictably, the discourse that accompanied the interventions of the English Company was replete with contradictions and subterfuges that revealed the lie of the liberal project accompanying the formalisation of Company rule. It is, however, not the intention here or the brief of this chapter to rearticulate this, but simply to look at the available material to reconstruct albeit patchily a story of everyday social relations among marginal groups in the city of Surat—a story mediated through two curious cases of murder/manslaughter. The two cases provide a fascinating contrast—almost symmetrical—one involved the household of a brahman banker, the other a Muslim notable, both originated out of a case of theft and punishment and both resulted in the exoneration and acquittal of the masters. Studying these cases provides us a range of details about the world of social relations in the household and outside, in a city that was well past its glory and exhibited all the symptoms of municipal decay. The narrative hopefully will bring out the everyday lives of servants and the ways in which they were treated both by their immediate masters as well as by their new record-keepers.

## THE END OF DYARCHY: SURAT IN 1800

Surat was a city in decline by the mid-eighteenth century. Even before 1759, when dyarchy formally began, the city had undergone a contraction in its trading resources and profile. After 1759, with the Castle Revolution that introduced the English Company as qiladars and half-rulers of the city, it suffered even further, thanks to conditions of joint rule by the English Company and a powerless nawab, neither of whom were able to maintain political stability or stem the irreversible process of municipal decay. Fragmented political authority and growing disaffection among the city's lower orders characterised the Bandar Mubarak where merchants and brokers, mostly of Hindu/bania and Parsi extraction, continued to drive their business and extend their connections with the English Company, thereby preserving the city's financial position in the region's trading and

<sup>15</sup> See Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

remittance networks.<sup>16</sup> The disaffection among the city's lower orders surfaced during two instances of rioting in 1788 and 1795, which displayed fissures in the social fabric of the city and the increasing paralysis of the ruling authority, constrained by the competing claims of the Marathas and the assertion of local contenders like the Sidi Abdul Rahim Yakut Khan (aka Balu Mian). The latter had once ruled as the commanders of the imperial fleet, with their base in Janjira, and had negotiated with the Marathas to assume power over a small principality in Sacheen near Surat. Balu Mian was especially obdurate and his occasional demands and actions created conflict situations for the English authorities in Surat. In fact, between 1795 and 1800, the English authorities had occasion to comment on the growing weakness of the municipal and judicial order in the city—and to seriously consider overhauling the system in such a way that would enable better regulation of commercial bankruptcies, public order and civic conditions. Two serious riots and a major public outcry against grain shortage in 1799 provided the immediate impulse for intervention and in 1800 the English East India Company took formal charge of the city, pensioning off the ruling nawab, undertaking to pay him an annual pension of 1 lakh rupees and a fifth of the net revenues of the city. Among the first policy decisions to accompany this formal transfer of power was the reform of the judicial establishment, to contain the interference of rival claimants in the admission of justice and revenue collection.<sup>17</sup>

The Treaty of 1800 vested the English East India Company with the civil and criminal administration of the city, augmented the military force that would undertake the defence of the city and restrained the various power holders from interfering in the day-to-day administration of the city, especially in the realm of law enforcement. The Company authorities appointed Alexander Ramsay as the new judge and magistrate who was advised to defer to local customs and usage. Thus, the death sentence in

<sup>16</sup> Ghulam A. Nadri, *Eighteenth Century Gujarat: The Dynamics of Its Political Economy, 1750–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 16; Lakshmi Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat and the West Coast* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Lakshmi Subramanian, 'The Eighteenth Century Social Order in Surat: A Reply and an Excursus on the Riots of 1788 and 1795', *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 2, 1991, 321–65.

criminal cases was withheld for the moment, even as strict orders were communicated to the city's Europeans to not seize and confine people at will. Maratha revenue collectors or chauteas were ordered not to interfere in the revenue collections of the city. The Company also debated proposals for uniting the customs houses in the city to streamline revenue collection and to regulate procedures for realising debt and action against creditors, all of which were expected to improve the city of Surat, its government and its finances. In the proposed arrangements, the emphasis was on the administration of justice, on ways of containing the so-called venality and corruption of the officials in the judicial establishment, and on framing of new laws to this end. As early as 1798, new procedures for registering cases and classifying them in a register were suggested. The new *adalat* was to meet every Wednesday and Saturday to try all complaints regarding succession or personal property, debts, contracts and the rest.<sup>18</sup> The overriding preoccupation with law and order may be explained in part by the growing disaffection of the lower orders whose actions seem to have escalated, especially around liquor houses and dens, and in part by the problems of commercial fraud and bankruptcies. Two years before the formal assumption of power by the English East India Company, the Surat Council had occasion to comment on how the exercise of authority in an irregular and oppressive manner by the principal natives and Europeans would stop with the establishment of a regular system of administration of justice.

The immediate implications of the transfer of power were not so obvious. One might surmise that the augmentation of the military and defence establishments saw more sepoys and dispossessed people move into the city, congregate around neighbourhoods and secure employment in households that required them. Servants, as testified by the contemporary documentation, were of various kinds, those attached to officers commanding new artillery and infantry as well as servants attached to officers of the *adalat* and even European establishments. We have very little to go by to help us track how these men were absorbed by their new masters or indeed where they came from. It is likely that they worked through informal networks and that they were increasingly familiar with

<sup>18</sup> Surat Factory Diary of 1798 (this forms part of the Surat Factory Inward Letter Book, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai).



the new institutional changes in the city and knew how to approach the smaller courts when the time came and the need arose.<sup>19</sup> We will in fact see how in the case of Jairam, the servant, the community to which he belonged approached the *adalat* immediately to press for redress. On the other hand, the increasing penetration of the English Company into the power structure of Surat did undermine the authority and influence of the older notables, the strains of which must have been experienced by their servants in different ways. Using the colonial archive to document the everyday lives of servants is not easy but a close reading reveals immense potential in tracking the complexities of a rapidly changing situation that posed fresh challenges to conditions of servitude and also in attempting to pose a range of questions about the terms of servitude, about their recruitment and about their survival strategies and social relations both within the household and outside. Some of these tensions surfaced in the context of two murders that rocked the city in the very year that the English East India Company assumed charge and set up its courts or *adalats* to overhaul the system of justice and to ensure law and order. The first involved a servant belonging to the household and establishment of Sidi Abdul Rahim Yakut Khan or Balu Mian who enjoyed a fiefdom in Sacheen (later part of the Surat principality); the other concerned Jairam, a servant who had for more than 13 years worked in the house of the brahman banker Tarwady Arjunji Nathji.

## HOUSEHOLDS AND THEIR INHABITANTS

It is difficult to reconstruct the anatomy of households, whether mercantile or aristocratic, in early colonial India. We do not have too many descriptions of how households actually functioned or how servants were recruited and retained. If we presume that aristocratic households, both Muslim and Rajput, by and large followed the guidelines of princely Mughal household establishments, one could quite legitimately surmise that such households of some repute maintained large retinues of servants and slaves.<sup>20</sup> James

<sup>19</sup> Asiya Siddiqi, 'Ayesha's World: A Butcher's Family in Nineteenth-Century Bombay', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1, 2001, 101–29.

<sup>20</sup> Shireen Moosvi, 'Domestic Service in Precolonial India: Bondage, Caste and Market', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64, 2003, 560–82.

Forbes, who spent a considerable time in western India, observed that Muslims in general treated slaves well and 'by kind attention render their servitude easy and comfortable'.<sup>21</sup> In the same breath, he maintained that the English treated their slaves equally well and that in any case slavery in Asia was different from that in the West Indies for there were neither cruel overseers nor taskmasters to increase the hardship of bondage. Forbes, like so many of his counterparts, spoke of intimacy and confidentiality among servants and masters—parroting the refrain that official Company discourse reinforced on slavery and servitude in Asia, emphasising its difference and at the same time endorsing existing patterns of social interaction among masters and their dependents in India. We know, for instance, that in Rajput households there was a tradition of maintaining *khawas* servants (from Cutch, who evolved into a small community) known for their trust and integrity and personal connections.<sup>22</sup> Whether these patterns were replicated in mercantile households is difficult to say; going from later architectural interpretations of Shekhawati households or *havelis* of merchants, it would seem that domestic space was segregated on lines of gender and presumably caste, and while the *baithak* functioned as an office space where merchants worked and interacted with agents, certain parts of the premises were not accessible to servants.<sup>23</sup> We shall see, especially in the case concerning Tarwady and his servant Jairam, how certain servants were denied access to the kitchen and the *puja* room, while others were able to sleep outside the master's bedroom and even guard his privacy and valuables. We have virtually no information on women servants in the establishments that we will allude to. However, given that aristocratic Muslim establishments maintained women slaves and attendants who were entrusted with a range of services, the silence in the archive need not be taken as definite.

How servants were recruited, how they were managed by their masters and how, if at all, they interacted with the public are important

<sup>21</sup> James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs: A Narrative of Seventeen Years Residence in India*, vol. 2, 2nd edn (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), 225.

<sup>22</sup> See the chapters on Rajput households by Geetanjali Tyagi and Priyanka Khanna in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> Virbhadr Singhji, *The Rajputs of Saurashtra* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1994), 227.

questions that in fact crop up in the two cases that we shall study. We know that servants (*naukar*) were part of a complex labour economy in pre-modern and early colonial India and corresponded to two forms of service and servitude—military labour as part of state-building and as servants or manpower in households which, in the Mughal case, was a world of slavery and servitude.<sup>24</sup> Presumably, this was a pattern that was reproduced in other elite households, especially in cities where servants were definitely recruited, sometimes bought, particularly during periods of famine and drought. It is also likely that caste-related taboos applied to the use and deployment of servants in Hindu mercantile houses, where Muslim servants were in all probability used as security staff outside the actual premises and granted permission to use designated spaces such as the stable and the basement. Trust and fidelity were invoked again and again to mark good servants from bad. In the language of fictive kinship employed by the masters, intimacy and reliability were key features that worked to keep servants subordinated. In the period under review, it is clear that servants like Jairam could fall back on the resources provided by their social networks of kin and community, but this was not by any means the norm. For in the Mansoor case, we come across instances of extreme precarity wherein servants were vulnerable and with no access to any form of support—community or public. It is here that transition politics becomes important, as a moment in rendering even more vulnerable the dispossessed people who flocked the city in search of low-paying employment, which included domestic servitude, and who could barely expect any form of support from the state or community networks.

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF MANSOOR<sup>25</sup>

In August 1800, in the intervening night of the 15th and the 16th, a body was found tied up in a grubby sheet near the water course running along

<sup>24</sup> Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> This case is based entirely on the material recorded in the Surat Factory Diary No. 50 of 1800, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai. See the proceedings from 16 August 1800.

the city's outer wall. On orders from the new judge and magistrate, a small committee was set up to examine the corpse and come up with a first report on the possible causes of the death. The committee reported that the body was of a Muslim man named Mansoor, between 25 and 30 years of age, who had suffered a fatal stab in the throat and was found with ashes in his mouth. One of the sepoys accompanying the committee members informed them that Mansoor was a servant of Balu Mian, a fact that was almost immediately confirmed by a man in Balu Mian's employ who had come there to take charge of the body and its interment. The committee used the opportunity to question some of the men in Balu Mian's service, notably Sidi Hussain, who was sent for and who confirmed the victim to be Mansoor. According to him, Mansoor had come to Surat to seek a cure for his venereal disease and his mouth had been badly affected by the pills he had been taking. He added that one night Mansoor had left his master's house, never to return. This was corroborated by other men working for Balu Mian who maintained that he had left on pretence of answering the call of nature but had not returned to his sleeping quarter that he shared with some of them. Meanwhile, Shaikh Ramzanee bin Shaikh Abdul Rasool, belonging to the local officer Gulzar Khan's company, who was deputed by the judge and magistrate to examine the corpse, reiterated the fact that the victim was indeed a slave belonging to Balu Mian and was found dead with his throat slit and ashes stuffed into his mouth.

The judge and magistrate communicated this to Balu Mian but received no reply—in fact, throughout the enquiry that followed, Balu Mian did not figure. In the follow-up enquiries, Sidi Hussain mentioned that in his search for Mansoor, he had chanced upon a young lad who was seen coming out of a deserted takiah (gardens adjacent to the dargah and tomb of Muckee Shah). The boy was summoned, the peon entrusted with this responsibility observed that the door to the takiah was almost always locked. Following the observation that some dead flowers and fresh leaves were on the sheet that covered Mansoor's body, the takiah suddenly seemed to be important as a possible *mise en scène* of the crime. A sepoy was sent to inspect the garden where he found some of flower beds trampled upon, some blood on the branches of a wild plant and, surprisingly, a knife of European make and design. At this stage the judge ordered another sepoy to look for a woman who was known to inhabit the takiah.

Until this point, it seemed that the enquiry had focused on the scene of crime, the murder weapon and perhaps an accomplice. The deduction was, however, not so simple and in fact it took more than three sessions of interrogation to extract a narrative that seemed to have some coherence. The first time the woman was examined, she along with the young boy (her son) maintained that they knew nothing, that the blood stains were actually betel spit marks. Subsequently, they admitted that they were residents in the takiah and that the previous day they had seen Mansoor visit the takiah and ask for the whereabouts of Muckee Shah's tomb. He prostrated before the tomb and around noon came back asking for a hookah. The old lady excused herself in the early evening as she had an invitation to dine at the house of Mulla Sultan (a peon at the adalat) while her son was despatched to the bazar to procure some khichdi. When she returned, she found Mansoor dead, with a stab in the throat; utterly frightened and alarmed at this, she and her son wrapped the body in a sheet and flung it over near the water course. The boy's account was more garbled but some of the details suggested how he had come to enjoy the support and assistance of a servant who lived and worked in Navinpura and under whose guidance he converted to Islam and took the name of Deen Muhammad. He maintained that he had seen the body only at 6 o' clock in the morning, near the water course, and that he with his mother went to inform one Bule Khan about the incident and the body. This coincided with the despatch of the adalat's peon to Sidi Hussain.

Given the gaps in the two versions, more interrogations followed and more variations of the narrative emerged. The second time around, the old woman mentioned how Mansoor had burst into the takiah saying that he was in trouble and under suspicion for misconduct and asked for refuge. The old woman had relented and permitted him to stay in the takiah only to find him stabbed and dead when she returned from her invitation. The story she came up with, besides being different from her earlier version, could not reconcile to several details. For one, there was no explanation of the ashes stuffed in Mansoor's mouth. It was also pointed out that the knife in question could not have been the murder weapon—it was an ordinary English table knife that could have hardly proved effective in killing someone.

By this time, Balu Mian replied to the judge's letter, excused himself for the delay that was caused by his scribes having taken leave on the

occasion of Janmashtami (*gokul* autumn is how it is recounted) and pressed for the quick release of the body so that it could be interred. The enquiry proceeded apace—it was made evident that the table knife was not the weapon, nor was Mansoor suicidal, and further that the body could have been moved from the site of the murder to the spot where it was found only with the assistance of some able-bodied men. The old woman was thus summoned again and this time she came up with a more detailed account that spoke of three new men at the scene. Two men dressed in turbans and loose shirts had come to the takiah asking for Mansoor. They asked him when he had come from his village in Sacheen and then proceeded to stab him, and left the body thus. They had also deliberately planted the old woman's knife by the side of the body. Her son seconded this narrative and even provided names of the two men—Rustam and Hussain—who alleged that Mansoor was a thief and had misbehaved with one of Balu Mian's women. The boy further said that Mansoor had left Balu Mian's service but had now returned after a gap of three years. However, Balu Mian's mind had been poisoned by some mischief-makers, the result of which had been the dastardly murder. The boy also referred to Fakirchand, a Hindu sepoy belonging to an English official of the East India Company John Griffith, who was a regular visitor to the takiah. This person had been approached by the boy and his mother for help in removing Mansoor's body from the takiah.

The role of Fakirchand appeared somewhat dubious and elusive in the boy's account. However, the adalat acted on orders to seize him as an accomplice in the murder of Mansoor. On 23 August, the old woman was interrogated yet again and this time she came up with additional details that referred to the two men as Nally Khan and Amir Khan as the murderers of Mansoor and who had dragged the body up the stairs of her house and thrown it over the bamboo wall of the loft. All through this grisly scene the woman lay on the cot terrified, especially as the two men threatened Fakirchand, the boy and her with dire consequences. After the murderers left, the three of them disposed of the body. The narrative thus far clearly established the role of two men connected with Balu Mian who had come from Sacheen to Surat just as Mansoor had done. And yet the judge and magistrate did not find it adequate enough to follow up the case. In a letter dated 16 September, he observed that he had been unable

to establish a clear link between Balu Mian and the perpetrators of the crime and also mentioned that he had received a communication from Balu Mian expressing his reservations about the way the enquiries had been conducted, especially of the men connected with his household. The trail runs cold after this and one can only hazard a guess that the Company authorities were reluctant to push the case, especially as it involved an ex-notable of the city.

Before we proceed to analyse the narrative and what it holds out for an understanding of the social world of servants and service providers and the newly emerging public order under the English East India Company, let us move to the next case that rocked the city in November of the same year. This too was a high-profile case as it involved a senior banker who happened to have bankrolled the Company's political designs. Here, too, while the banker in question was made liable and punishment was clapped on, the reluctance of the Company to upset the status quo was in full display. What enabled this was a particular assemblage of evidence that sought to give what Radhika Singha has called judicial credibility to narratives of shame, dishonour, disgrace, great provocation, etc., as mitigating factors.<sup>26</sup>

## THE CASE OF THE ERRING SERVANT: TARWADY AND JAIRAM<sup>27</sup>

On 13 December 1800, the judge and magistrate wrote to the Surat Council about the recent melancholy event—the unfortunate death of a servant named Jairam—that had transpired in the house of Tarwady Arjunji Nathji and that had compelled him to confine the senior banker in the *adalat*. Tarwady's supporters insisted on his immediate release as the associates, family and caste members of the deceased had agreed to a *razanamah*, withdrawing their complaints and accepting the compensation the banker had promised. The judge and magistrate, however, had stuck to form and protocol and restrained the banker in conformity with 'Section II

<sup>26</sup> Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic'.

<sup>27</sup> The reconstruction of this case is based on the depositions that came up in course of the trial in 1800. See Surat Factory Diary No. 51, Part 1, 41–155.

Regulation III of the Act of 1800', but was 'desirous to avoid any degree of severity that may be improper as from the consideration of the advanced age, the peculiar status of a Brahmin and his extensive concerns as a shroff'. As the trial progressed through December, the Company remained vigilant and especially mindful of not hurting the sentiments of the city's shroffs and in the process came up with a judgement that seemed to be perfectly consistent with local tradition.

The death of Jairam as a result of a brutal inquisition came in the wake of a theft in Arjunji's heavily guarded three-storeyed house that had all the trappings of a rich banker's establishment. Thanks to the detailed enquiries the trial produced, we have important references to the servants the banker had in the capacity of personal servants in charge of specific activities, of looking after household effects, including jewels, of security guards who were in charge of the establishment, of gomasthas or agents who worked from 8 AM TO 8 PM. Loyalty and trustworthiness seem to have been key to the ties that united the servants with the master, and any slur and suspicion made the situation especially fraught. Thus, as soon as the theft was discovered and suspicion fell on the master's personal favourite Jairam and his brother, the household seems to have immediately taken action by confining Jairam, his brother and father-in-law. Further, it would also appear that the master, that is, the senior banker, had even intimidated judge and magistrate Alexander Ramsey about the event and there seemed to be an informal understanding about the matter and an indirect endorsement of the master's right to punish the servant over what was considered a private matter. Some of the evidence suggested that the servant's family members were turned away by the master with the warning that they had the *arzee* (sanction) of Ramsey to keep Jairam confined. What followed was a case of confinement for two weeks during which Jairam was subjected to brutal punishment (flogging, whipping and finally bearing a grind stone on his back), leading to his death. Until then, the English judge and his *adalat* made no move to openly interfere in what punishment was inflicted in private by a master on a servant whom he considered his son. This particular gloss (being loved like a son) was repeated again and again, and in fact framed the interrogation and trial that proceeded to take place. Thus, deponent after deponent insisted that so vexed were the servants that an act of theft had been perpetrated that



they vented their anxieties by heaping severe punishments on Jairam, the accused. Jairam himself had been attached to his master's household in the capacity of a personal servant for more than six years. The master had a particular liking for him and had even taught Jairam the rudiments of reading and writing. This, of course, did not preclude the old banker from ordering the most brutal of punishments for Jairam who, along with his brothers, was the prime suspect for stealing jewels and around 30,000 rupees in cash. The interrogations of the security staff in charge of the punishment, of the other servants and of friends of Jairam established beyond doubt that Jairam and his brother had been severely flogged and punished on the express orders of the banker and that Jairam finally succumbed to his injuries.

Thereafter, Jairam's relatives and his caste members stood vigil over his body, refusing to move it. A compromise was effected with the banker's gomastha promising monetary compensation and the body was removed. However, at this stage, the English were forced to shake off their initial apathy and to initiate a rudimentary trial to demonstrate their newly acquired powers but without compromising the relationship they enjoyed with the senior banker. What the Company seemed to be doing was grappling with the reality of negotiating its own authority and balancing it with the existing notions of rank and ritual in the city. Accordingly, Tarwady was confined until such time the evidence was assembled to prove that the action was not intended to take the life of the servant. The banker continued to insist that he was not guilty, that as a brahman he was loath to take the life of even a fly and so how could he possibly have caused the death of one of Almighty's human creatures.

The trial proceedings are replete with fascinating details about the servants in the household, the duties they performed, the nature of intimacy they enjoyed with the master, and the networks of social communication within which they operated. What was striking was the repeated emphasis on the affective relations between the master and his servants, which found expression in the questions the latter were asked during the trial. While there were some allusions to the material conditions of servants, what stood out most palpably was the special relationship that Jairam enjoyed, how the banker saw him, not as a servant but as a son. The depositions also suggested that the servants acted on the orders of

their master, and that it was Baroo Jamadar who had acted far in excess of the orders given. Bhucan Pandya, the senior servant of the household and about 65 years of age, made out the affair to be an expression of collective outrage at the theft, an act that had never happened in the years he had served his master. Even Baroo Jamadar and Gulab Singh, who were the main persons interrogated during the course of the trial and had a different story to tell, maintained that the master had failed to extract a confession from Jairam and had given them a free hand, and yet he was not predisposed to taking the life of his servant whom he loved so much that he had even taught him writing and accounts. It could well be that all these confessions were a cover up to obfuscate the peremptory orders that the banker had issued to extract a confession. In any case, eventually the banker was let off with a monetary fine and ritual expiation that was decided upon after consultation with scriptural experts.

What do these two cases—along with the confessions and depositions that accompanied them—tell us of the social world of servants in eighteenth-century Surat? Quite a bit. For one, both cases yield important details about the actual organisation of domestic service, the local base of recruitment (note how in Balu Mian's case the dead servant came from his fief in Sacheen), the dependence of households on servants (with the latter performing a range of both specialised functions as well as personal service), the ties of loyalty and obedience that masters demanded of their servants, and how breach of trust was always held up to mete out the most brutal of punishments. The narratives also reveal the larger social networks and spaces that servants were part of and how these occasionally proved to be support systems. In Mansoor's case, it was evident that he and the woman deponent, or indeed the sepoy attached to the *adalat*, were part of a larger social circle that met, ate together, gossiped and participated in the life of the neighbourhood that was defined by what seemed an especially derelict garden attached to a *dargah*. In the case of Jairam, the community ties appeared much stronger for not only did his relatives get in touch with their caste elders to force the banker to some sort of monetary recompense, but the household too seems to have drawn its servants from this neighbourhood. That Jairam and his brothers, residents of Phoolpara, were imprisoned and punished before any of them escaped, leaving Jairam to bear the brunt of brutal interrogation leading to his death, was known

to his family, to servants and beggars in the locality, all of whom were drawn into a private affair that became public very quickly.

The two cases not only help in mapping the actual life experiences of servants in Surat but also demonstrate how resolute the Company was in constructing the household as a private space, where servants enjoyed a very particular relationship with the master, which could not be easily comprehended or countermanded. For the Company officials, this was a private matter that needed to be contained. There was first and foremost the obvious reason of their long-standing financial agreement with the banker whose funds were required to sponsor their military campaigns. There was also the question of his status as an upper-caste banker whose prerogatives had to be safeguarded and these included the control that he needed to run his household and his business as smoothly as possible. A banking establishment such as that of Tarwady could not but require services—and the evidence does point to the ability of the household to have maintained servants over long periods of time who were tied by loyalty and trust which, of course, translated into paternalism and dependency. We have, for instance, the testimony of Soorchand who expressly said that he functioned as a personal servant whose job was simply to rub oil on his master's feet and sleep by the door of his room on the third storey. Soorchand clearly was allowed to enter or even inhabit the room for he had specific orders to sleep outside the door of the room, ensuring that no one came in or went out without his master's permission. Similarly, we have the Muslim sepoy and security guard Baroo Jamadar stationed outside the house and allowed access to some rooms like the space that gomasthas used or the underground vault where firewood was kept and where the prisoner Jairam was detained. The trial, as indeed the case of Mansoor, brought to the surface the relations between various servants, some of whom enjoyed greater access than others and who were prepared to effect their master's orders without demur. Above all, it displayed the salience and the deployment of the idea and emotion of trust and intimacy that were embedded not in a contractual agreement, but in social ties of subordination that could and did result in the most violent of humiliations.

The judicial proceedings that accompanied the two cases followed some of the new protocols and procedures that the English administration

was trying to put in place in accordance with Regulation III of the Act of 1800. These specified the duty of the magistrate to apprehend criminals charged with theft, assault and murder, to carefully take down depositions in writing without prejudice, and included the following caveat: should the party tried be a Muslim or Hindu, the judges were to draw a summary of the case which was to be concluded by a question thereon, to be turned over to native experts of the law of the religious persuasion of the parties respectively as to what punishment was thereby assigned to such offence, on the ascertainment of which the judges of session were to pronounce judgement on the party accordingly. Reviewing the depositions on the Tarwady case, it is amply clear that the judge and magistrate from the very beginning preferred to tread lightly and turn over the arbitration to scriptural experts and to emphasise what the witnesses said about the extreme intimacy and indulgence that the servant had enjoyed, which somehow exonerated the master of his emotional outburst that had led to the servant's death. The fact of being treated like a son, of enjoying the confidence of his master, was repeated and reproduced time and again and was adequate to build a case for pardon that enjoyed the full sanction of the scriptures. The English were happy to do this especially as they were all too aware of the immense prestige and credit that the banker enjoyed and whose alienation could prove detrimental to their own interests. There was neither any inconsistency nor any contradiction perceived; the English by this time had already embarked on the project of codifying Hindu and Muslim laws which they saw as useful bridges to facilitate legal conversations. They were also not particularly concerned with the capricious treatment that servants were exposed to. Take the following observations of the Orientalist William Jones who laid out the limits of masters' authority:

A master may legally correct his servant with moderation, and with a view to his amendment; not so if the servant so corrected should die of some misfortune unforeseen and unlikely to happen, would the master be guilty of any crime; but if the correction be immoderate, excessive, unreasonable, cruel, the party may have, if he live, a reparation in damages; or if he die the master will be guilty of manslaughter or murder, according to the circumstances of manslaughter if he gave the fatal blow in a sudden burst of passion after violent provocation, with a weapon not likely to kill, of murder if he had full

time for deliberation and coolness of blood, and that whether he intended to destroy life, or only to chastise immoderately, for the true sense of malice to constitute this horrible crime, is malignity of heart or a disposition to do mischief, which may be ascertained by comparing the fault to the correction, the age and condition of the person stricken with the force of the striker, and the danger of the instrument used by him.<sup>28</sup>

These observations were not very different from what the banker made out in his impassioned defence or in the scriptural injunctions that were invoked in this case. In the end, the court in its concluding statement observed that

from the circumstances that have been proved in course of the trial, they cannot think that the *prisoner ever intended to deprive Jairam Jagdees of life*, but they are decidedly of opinion the evidence they have heard has fully established that he was privy to the very illegal punishment inflicted on the dead, which was the cause of his death and originated in the prisoner's orders.

The punishment that was decided was entirely symbolic, after consultations with the pandit, and having once more reiterated the point that the banker had never intended to take the life of a servant whom he loved as his own, the court came up with a scheme of reparations to restore the banker's caste status in the city and to commute part of his penalties into money that was subsequently used to build the English jail. (As it happened, the system of legal and moral penalties instituted in Hindu law as embodied in the Dharmasastras made Tarwady's case an open-and-shut one and carried with it several potential openings for manoeuvre. The Dharmasastras not only had clear provisions for expiation of sins and penalties, but also clearly marked admissible punishments that could be inflicted on sons, pupils and wives.) In the context of the banker's case, Jairam the servant was his son, a point that the banker and his entire entourage stressed time and again. In their classification of sins, the Dharmasastras stated clearly that if a brahman administers moderate corporal punishment to his son, pupil or wife for

<sup>28</sup> Lord Teignmouth, *The Works of Sir William Jones with the Life of the Author*, vol. 7 (London: Printed for John Stockdale, Piccadilly; and John Walker, Paternoster-Row, 1807), 9–10.

some fault, and the son, pupil or wife suddenly dies, he incurs no sin. Successive commentaries on the *Shastras* reinforced the point that the punishment could be administered with a rope or bamboo slip on the back (but never on the head or the chest) and only if this condition was violated could the act be construed as a crime and the punisher be at par with the thief or offender, as the case may be.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The two cases were among the earliest recorded ones involving brutalisation of domestic servants—introducing an important layer in the emergent discourse on domestic slavery that was often seen as benign and as an extension of familial relations that the English had resolved not to interfere with. The cases provide us with some useful details on the material conditions of servitude, how they were absorbed in a household and how they were left with little option for redress; even flight was not an option as we saw with the cases of Mansoor and Jairam—once apprehended, both torture and extreme punishment seemed to be commonplace. Where any intercession seemed to have been possible was at the community level; in the case of Jairam, we do see the caste assembly resisting the removal of the corpse until some compensation was made. The brother of Jairam mentioned quite categorically that he had withdrawn his complaint because the banker had promised some provision for Jairam's wife and had even promised him some money for medication. That servants depended on such social networks is obvious; what is not is whether the period of transition saw growing precarity of employment, resulting in instances of desertion and/or breach of trust. There is no question of extrapolating anything from these two cases but one may well make a case for the combined history of slavery and servitude. The two narratives complemented each other to posit the image of an extended family with loyal retainers whose control and responsibility lay with the father figure (i.e., the master). Just how far the English were prepared to let the absolute power manifest in forms of brutality and punishment was not yet clear. Radhika Singha would suggest that the English authorities were keen on clipping the wings of the masters and on containing the excesses of paternalist and patriarchal control that went

against the state's imperatives for monopolising the right of violence. This evidently did not happen in the period of transition—in 1800—in Surat. They were unsure of their authority and were prepared to take the line of least resistance when it came to issues of punishment. In fact, even in a less high-profile case than that of Tarwady Arjunji, we have the letter of Daniel Seton, the Surat chief, to Jonathan Duncan, the Governor, informing the latter of a murder and recommending the ordering of a trial by a qazi and a mufti and

to keep the relations of the deceased quiet and satisfied, and perhaps the obstacle to justice, if a legal one, might, by your orders, be soon removed. If the Court sentence the prisoner to death, I think, as the acting Nabob, he is authorized to order the sentence to be carried into execution. Don't be uneasy at this unfortunate circumstance; I hope to fall on means to satisfy the deceased's relations, without causing any commotion, which the execution might, from the want of awe to the authority of the representative of the Nabob.<sup>29</sup>

Balancing interests in a hierarchical society was the only admissible means to ease the transition from Mughal rule to British rule with servants joining other subaltern groups to feature as prime casualties. When slavery was so easily recast in terms of domestic servitude that somehow did not carry the same horror of plantation slavery, what hope was there for the domestic servant who was almost like a family member and whose vocation was to remain loyal and earn the master's trust at all cost! At the same time, reading these cases closely raises questions about the private–public dichotomy that surfaced in the first century of Company rule. In the case of the banker and his servant, even while the rhetoric of privacy and the household dimensions of the punishment were articulated, the community's response and pushback was public. Also, for the banker, this private household affair that had gone horribly wrong had the real potential of impinging on his public reputation of credit and honour that he invoked repeatedly. In the case of Mansoor, which was apparently a ritual murder, an expression of personal jurisdiction, it had the spectacular quality of being publicly

<sup>29</sup> *Parliamentary Papers (PP), Papers presented to the House of Commons, relating to East India Affairs, Surat, 1795–1800, 1806, 478.*

staged and when the English actually did nothing. Finally, there were those small people, the old woman and her adopted son who slip in and out of the narrative, whose legal standing and protection were vague; whose subjects were they and who would stand up for them remained questions that were difficult to answer.





# 8 | 'Servant Problem' and the 'Social-Subaltern' of Early Colonial Calcutta

NITIN SINHA

'Servant problem' has variously surfaced as a framework of analysis in historical writings on domestic service. Globally, a big wave of writing, expressing the 'crisis' in the organisation of domestic labour using this phrase, came at the turn of the twentieth century. In Germany, for instance, it was argued that inferior workers with diminished skill entered into the profession because of the increased demand for servants.<sup>1</sup> The specific lament was the loss of obedient and respectful servants as were allegedly found in the earlier period. But interestingly, even people from the earlier generations talked about servants in the same manner. This was true neither for Germany alone nor for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries only. It was the case across continental Europe, the Atlantic world and Britain all through the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. The refrain, I suspect, continues to be fairly prevalent even now.<sup>2</sup>

The persistence over a long period suggests that 'servant problem' became almost a 'genre' of writing on domestic servants. Primarily, it referred to the *shortage* of good servants. There were in fact different registers for explaining the 'problem' over this long period of time—

<sup>1</sup> Henriette Jastrow, 'Domestic Servants in Germany', *The Economic Journal* 9, no. 36, 1899, 625–26.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *The Servant Problem: Domestic Workers in North America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985); Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). The loss of love and loyalty in Calcutta of the late twentieth century amounted to 'servant problem'.

preference of women for industrial and urban service sector work, the world wars, urban growth, migration from rural to urban, corrupting influence of the city life leading to moral degeneracy of the servants, and so on.<sup>3</sup> But the sampling of complaints across time and region suggests that it was indeed a generational nostalgia, with each generation thinking that ‘the problem was unique to them’, a product of their own changed times.<sup>4</sup> For us historians, therefore, there is something useful in this phrase: to turn the ‘servant problem’ into an analytical category to underline the apparent ‘sameness’ within the contours of change.<sup>5</sup> Specifically in the South Asian case, where work on domestic servants is still in its incubation phase, the added value is to use the framework to think broadly of the social-subaltern as conditioned and encountered by the early years of the colonial rule.

<sup>3</sup> For eighteenth-century Britain, see Kristina Straub, *Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1–18; for general European overview, Raffaella Sarti, ‘Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers’, *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314; for the twentieth-century US, David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), Ch. 6; Mary Romero, ‘Immigration, the Servant Problem, and the Legacy of the Domestic Labour Debate’, *University of Miami Law Review* 53, no. 4, 1999, 1052–57.

<sup>4</sup> Rosie Cox, *The Servant Problem* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cox argues that in our times the meaning of the ‘servant problem’ is different: it refers to the fact that domestic employment not only exists but is also expanding, creating ‘new’ practices of illegality and servitude. Cox, *The Servant Problem*. Mary Romero sees the meaning of this phrase in the ways the immigrant domestic servants are excluded on the basis of race, class and gender, and turned into paperless, invisible entities. Romero, ‘Immigration’. This, however, appears to be the academic rendering of the meaning embedded in this phrase. In the Indian case, for instance, while this ‘progressive’ and ‘liberal’ meaning might exist in small pockets, the usual implication is either closer to the past sentiments of not being able to find loyal, faithful and efficient servants or seen in the context of new ‘apartment’-based lifestyle in which the presence of servants, particularly of live-ins, is regarded as dangerous and life-threatening. See Samita Sen, *Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work: Domestic Work in Bengal* (Kolkata: School of Women’s Studies—Jadavpur University, 2015), 1–15. This concern became an important reason for the shift in preference for female servants, especially by families with daughters. The part-timers were thought to be less threatening but not completely so. Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude*, 58–59, 99–107.

‘Servant problem’ was obviously a problem that was felt by the masters and mistresses. It was an anxiety felt by those who hired servants. It represented the fears of the hiring class. However, as Straub argued, it also incorporated the hopes of the serving class when they came to the city, for instance, to London. The ‘servant problem’, therefore, was a combination of hopes and fears of two different social groups that came face-to-face within the household but the making of which unfolded in the larger context of the changing urban scenario and the shifting political economy of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

This essay deals with a specific time period and place—urban Calcutta in the years following the formal institutionalisation of the rule of the English East India Company (EIC) in the late 1750s and 1760s. The essay is also primarily focused on domestic servants in European households. The larger context, however, is of the relationship between law and labouring forms. The main highlight of the story is the state’s relationship with the nature and labour force of the domestic servants and service in the context of urban Calcutta. In other words, unlike Straub who uses the framework of ‘servant problem’ to explore how family was leveraged to guarantee the contract (the chief instrument of hiring in eighteenth-century England), I use this framework in the context of the early years of colonial Calcutta (1750s–1780s) to explore the genesis of the ‘problem’ as located in the interplay of law and burgeoning labour market of which European domestic life was a part.

Through a close reading of different regulations and resolutions passed between the 1750s and the 1780s, we can notice that the British society in Calcutta also faced a ‘servant problem’. However, before we set out to analyse its nature and examine the underlying impulses, it can be confidently stated that in the Indian case as well there were multiple distinct

<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, one way of approaching the ‘servant problem’. There is a much broader scope of engagement through political philosophy and legal questions, in spite of and resulting into the invisibilisation of servant as labour, as they emerged from the seventeenth century in England and elsewhere in Europe, in which ‘domestic service relationship was seen as one of the most widely experienced in the society’. See Carolyn Steedman, ‘The Servant’s Labour: The Business of Life, England, 1760–1820’, *Social History* 29, no. 1, 2004, 3; also see Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

moments when the 'servant problem' surfaced or, to put it more precisely, when it became *pronounced*. For, there was hardly a phase in which it did not 'exist'. As noted above, it appears to be a generational lament; the 'same' rues persisted but in different contexts, giving it a different meaning and evoking different types of remedial measures. Before coming to the time period of our study, that is, the late eighteenth century, let us briefly dash ahead in time to the late nineteenth century, for which the theoretical anchors of labour and cultural modes of history writing are more firmly placed in our existing literature.

### 'LABOUR' AND 'CULTURE': AXES OF 'SERVANT PROBLEM'

Through legal and ego-documents as well as in prescriptive literature, we discover a 'servant problem' in the late nineteenth century. There were two overlapping but differing loci of the debate in this period. One was in the late 1870s in the domain of law that aimed to amend and codify the law governing the master and servant relationship in India. Prior to this, the Indian Penal Code (IPC, 1860) had made the criminal punishment owing to the 'breach of contract' legal in a variety of circumstances, which was earlier limited to the cases of advances made for work, as originally planned under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (1859).<sup>7</sup> In fact, certain categories of servants involved in transport (palanquin-bearers and boatmen) and those involved in taking care of 'helpless persons' were included. The IPC, however, had nullified the blanket criminalisation of the breach as practised under the 1819 Regulation in the case of domestic servants. Petitions were submitted to the government to extend the breach clause but the government rejected these proposals.<sup>8</sup> Much of this history of legal provisions and shifts has been written about but for purposes of the 'servant problem' it is important to highlight the polarised viewpoints between the state and the masters on the provisions of law. Also, the shift

<sup>7</sup> Michael Anderson, 'Work Construed: Ideological Origins of Labour Law in British India to 1918', in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour*, ed. P. Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 111–12.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, 'Work Construed'; Sen, *Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work*, 32–33.

from the criminal to the civil modes of regulation is marked in the 'servant problem' of this period. So, in the 1870s when two bills were introduced to apply the employment relationship as it existed in Britain, primarily the feature of 'contract of employment', to govern domestic servants in India, they both failed.<sup>9</sup> While the Master and Servant Acts were repealed in Britain in 1875, leading to de-legalisation of penal punishment for the breach of contract, the applicability of some of the provisions enshrined in the two bills was also found unfavourable in India but on completely

<sup>9</sup> Even in England, the 'contract of employment' did not mean reciprocal relationship between masters and servants. On the contrary, the nineteenth-century model of master-servant laws not only brought workers under the penal control but also diluted the master's traditional obligation to care, in which the master was duty-bound to maintain his servant even when the latter was without employment. Simon Deakin, 'Legal Origins of Wage Labour: The Evolution of the Contract of Employment from Industrialisation to the Welfare State', in *The Dynamics of Wage Relations in the New Europe*, eds Linda Clarke, Peter de Gijzel and Jörn Janssen (Boston: Springer, 2000), 34-35, and Simon Deakin, 'The Contract of Employment: A Study in Legal Evolution', Working Paper No. 203, ESRC Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge, June 2001, 17. In essence, it was a contractual relationship between formally unequal parties. See Ravi Ahuja, 'Making the Empire a Thinkable Whole: Master and Servant Law in Transterritorial Perspective', *International Review of Social History* 52, no. 2, 2007, 288. There appears to be a great deal of confusion on whether domestic servants in England were included under the master-servant acts. In the mid-eighteenth century, prior to the introduction of the master and servant acts, it was widely understood that the service provisions of the Statute of Artificers only applied to servants in husbandry; the 1747 Act thus gave the justices jurisdiction to examine cases of dispute in a range of crafts that did not explicitly mention domestic service. Deakin, 'The Contract of Employment', 19. Perhaps this is the reason why Hay and Craven say that '[c]onfusingly, from the late eighteenth century, domestic servants were excluded by judicial decision from the scope of master servant statutes in England'. Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, eds, *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7. Carolyn Steedman suggests that although this was the case, many magistrates in practice did intervene in the domestic service relationship. Carolyn Steedman, *Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 131. However, she also clarifies that the form of punishment was not criminal; personal email exchange. If this be the case, then the implications of the master-servant acts as brought in the colony (seen below in the discussion of the 1759 regulation) predated the metropolitan implementations on the specific clause of the penal provisions.

opposite grounds. First, because of the assumed peculiarity of the Indian domestic set-up, it was thought better not to interfere with the patriarchal structure of the household and the power exercised by the 'native master/ employer' over his servant.<sup>10</sup> Second, if the bills were turned into acts, they allegedly would have brought troubles to European masters. The bills proposed to make physical chastisement illegal as well as proposed to remove the practice of fines, which was not acceptable to European masters. The difference between the home situation, where the penal punishment was abolished, and the colonial setting, where it was still deemed to be relevant and necessary by masters, was clearly evident.<sup>11</sup>

The second locus of the debate in the same period existed outside the domain of the law at the site of the household. The nature of European community had significantly changed in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were far greater number of *memsahibs* living in India than they did in the earlier period.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the advice and domestic manuals

<sup>10</sup> There are indeed many throwbacks to this argument: one, to the debate on 'Indian slavery' in the 1830s that 'peculiarised' Indian domestic set-up by labelling the slavery practised within the household as 'benign' and 'familial'; and two, to the longer process of colonial legal intervention that first 'domesticated' the patriarchal power of the male householder and simultaneously (and equally) resuscitated his patriarchal control in matters deemed 'private'. Radhika Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the "Head of the Household", 1772–1843', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 309–43.

<sup>11</sup> The references to Indian bills are based on Nitin Varma's written 'Notes' in the panel, 'Regulating Domestic Service and Colonialism', European Social Science History Congress, Belfast, 3–7 April 2018, in absentia. For British part, Hay and Craven, *Masters, Servants and Magistrates*; Simon Deakin, 'Legal Origins of Wage Labour'. The provisions of criminalisation of the breach of contract in England came through the 1747, 1758 and 1766 Master and Servant Acts, followed by the Act of 1823. The Act of 1867 replaced 'imprisonment with fines as the principal remedy for breach of the Act (imprisonment remained a residual possibility)'. Deakin, 'Legal Origins of Wage Labour', 34.

<sup>12</sup> While throughout the nineteenth century the proportion of British women in India was far lesser than British men, a significant shift is noticeable in their numbers in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to one estimate, around 1800, there were 250 European women in Calcutta as against 4,000 men, that is, in the ratio of 1:16. Pran Nevile, 'Memsahibs and the Indian Marriage Bazaar', *The Tribune*, 19 January 2003; towards the second half of the nineteenth century, at the all-India level and not unlikely also in Bengal, the ratio reportedly rose to 1:3. Peter Marshall, 'British Society in India under the Company', *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 1, 1997, 90.

written in this period proliferated. They instructed European mistresses in deft management of their Indian servants. The concerns ranged from controlling chances of kitchen pilferage by cooks to ensuring ayahs' cleanliness and hygienic conduct. Some tried to prise open the 'hidden' world of the servants—ayahs secretly reporting on their fellow servants to their memsahibs and doorkeepers lending money to other servants as well as charging 'customary fee' from hawkers, all known to the masters but ignored—for the readers.<sup>13</sup> This aspect of colonial encounter, between memsahibs, ayahs and male servants, does not need much elaboration as it is fairly covered in the existing historiography.<sup>14</sup> Woven in this was the anxiety of racialised sexuality and the possibilities of its breach, primarily between the white mistress and black servants.<sup>15</sup>

What is less explored is the connection between two divergent ways that led to the upscaling of the 'servant problem' in this period: one, the legal and regulative attempts (through bills) to bring servants under the Master Servant Acts; two, the 'cultural' texts of anxiety, satire and disdain (advice manuals) over the race and gender of the servant. Most of the writings on the cultural construction of imperial gender politics have not cared to look at the labour aspect. The contemporary voices, however, were quite clear. In 1874, a lady criticised the colonial government for bringing many positive changes in India but for omitting 'one grand and important benefit', that is, to establish 'a more peaceful and more desirable relation between Masters and Servants that at present any where [sic] exists'. A mix of legal initiatives such as registration of servants together with establishing of training centres was proposed.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Hull, *The European in India* (London: Henry King's & Co., 1871), 124–27.

<sup>14</sup> Fae Dussart, "'That Unit of Civilisation' and 'the Talent Peculiar to Women': British Employers and Their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22, no. 6, 2015, 706–21; Indrani Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memasahibs in Colonial India,' *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3, 2009, 299–328; Nupur Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India,' *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4, 549–62.

<sup>15</sup> Fae Dussart, "'To Glut a Menial's Grudge': Domestic Servants and the Ilbert Bill Controversy of 1883,' *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14, no. 1, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> A Lady, 'Domestic Servants in Bengal,' *The Bengal Magazine*, June 1874, 481–87. I am not aware of any training schools for domestic servants ever set up in Bengal



The thrust of the scholarly writings on imperial gender is on showing how the Anglo-Indian home became the site of the public performance of imperial politics, without linking the ‘new imperial domesticity’ to the question of paid domestic labour, changing expectations of employers and the changes in the work process.<sup>17</sup> It appears that in India the role of household technology in changing the work process was not of comparable scale to other societies. Yet one can discern changes and raise questions that have not been satisfactorily answered (many of them outside the scope of this chapter): among certain service groups and categories that had a long history of being employed both in public and private, what did sewing machine do to *darzees* (tailors), municipal piped water supply to *bheesties* (watermen), electric fans to *punkah*-bearers and the use of cars to *syces*?<sup>18</sup>

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unlike in other countries, albeit with marginal effect only. See Martin and Segrave, *The Servant Problem*, Ch. 5. In India, orphan schools were set up for poor European children, especially girls, to teach them some skill—in embroidery, dress-making and cookery—to enable them to find work outside, including as domestic servants, after leaving the school. David Arnold, ‘European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7, no. 2, 1979, 104–27.

<sup>17</sup> Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858–1900* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2002); Alison Blunt, ‘Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4, 1999, 421–40.

<sup>18</sup> For technology, see Satyasikha <https://servantspasts.wordpress.com/2018/01/20/my-faithful-servant-concubinage-and-service-in-early-colonial-households/> (accessed on 2 April 2019); for tailors and sewing machine, David Arnold, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India’s Modernity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Tailors and washermen were also losing to the competition provided by British firms in Calcutta, once again based on new work process. By the 1830s, some of them had lost their wealth and were employed at low wages in these firms. Some had become servants and labourers. Sumanta Banerjee, ‘The World of Ramjan Ostagar: The Common Man of Old Calcutta’, *Calcutta—The Living City*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), 76–77. Much later, in the changed context of nationalism, caste-based associations and trade unionism, the washermen of Calcutta and Howrah held their caste panchayats and decided not to ‘work under the Dyeing and Cleaning companies but only under the direction of prosperous members of their own caste’. Tanika Sarkar, ‘“Dirty Work, Filthy Caste”: Calcutta Scavengers in the 1920s’, in *Working Lives & Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (New Delhi: Tulika, 2013), 177. In fact, the heightened critical stance of both Europeans and Indians on the hygiene and sanitation

A long history of treating servants as markers of status and respectability obfuscated the necessity to connect the history of 'gentility' of the masters/mistresses with the everyday labour of servants that went into maintaining that status.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the 'gaze' of labour historians remained largely fixed on public sites of labour—factories and plantations—which is well reflected in the histories of labour legislation that traces its beginning in the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Even when conceptually the apparatus of formal regulation by the state was inversed to understand the making of the informal labour relations, the starting point of 'the privatisation of regulation of labour [as] constructed by colonial State [sic] action' is taken to be 1814.<sup>21</sup> Ahuja provides a longer history of the colonial intervention in Madras; both Ahuja and Mohapatra refer to the regulations that affected domestic servants. However, the conceptualisation of the domestic servant itself as a part of labour, his/her place in the legal construction of work based upon contractual control of wage and time, and the possibility of the lingering effect of the ethical norms of servitude coming down from the earlier period (as shown in detail in some chapters in this volume) while service was recast through new colonial mechanism of control and discipline need further explication.

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of midwives, seen through the prism of caste, could also be seen as a critique based on new knowledge and expectation emerging in the late nineteenth century. Sharmita Ray, 'The Polluting Presence at Birth: Analysing Midwifery in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal', Paper presented at the conference 'Servants' Pasts', Delhi, 11–13 February 2017.

<sup>19</sup> This task, though difficult, is doable through a close reading of diaries and memoirs. Swapna Banerjee has used this kind of material but her formulations are also anchored in tracing the cultural formation of the middle class, showing how servants were important in the representations of the middle class. Servants do not appear in this work as labouring social-subaltern. Swapna Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> With one notable exception of Ravi Ahuja, 'The Origins of Colonial Labour Policy in Eighteenth-Century Madras', *International Review of Social History* 44, no. 2, 1999, 159–95; Ravi Ahuja, 'Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context: Madras, c. 1750–1800', *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 4, 2002, 793–826. See the second section of the 'Introduction' for further elaboration of this point.

<sup>21</sup> Prabhu P. Mohapatra, 'Regulated Informality: Legal Constructions of Labour Relations in Colonial India 1814–1926', in *Workers in the Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2005), 69.

A recent study by the only South Asian labour historian who has moved her gaze 'inward' from factories to the paid domestic work also charts the long history of domestic labour regulation in a rather short time period of the nineteenth century starting from 1819.<sup>22</sup> Both legislations of 1814 and 1819 are extremely significant. What this chapter proposes is that there is a 'prehistory' of intense colonial engagement on the question of domestic servants. The account of this prehistory builds upon the work of these historians, but also proposes to shift the angle of vision conceptually. It is not exclusively or narrowly the labour legislation problem that is at stake in the early years between the 1750s and the 1780s.<sup>23</sup> The colonial state

<sup>22</sup> Sen, *Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work*, 28–40.

<sup>23</sup> This recent historiographical intervention on labour and law puts divided weight on what appears to be two polar views, between 'indigenous' institutions and cultural practices which defied or marginalised the attempts or effects of the colonial intervention on the one hand and the centrality of colonial regulation on the other. So, for the former view, the persistence of social obligation, the role of intermediaries and entrenchment of customary practices flourished outside the purview of colonial power and law or because of its weakness and active subversion. The institutional capacity of the colonial state to impose its own laws, in this view, was weak and the clever appropriations were manifold. On the other hand, we have a set of views that argue for the active intervention of the colonial state right from its early days in shaping, say, the labour market, and effecting a contractual regime wilfully in a way that the 'informal' cultural practices emerged through that intervention and not without it. The implications of these two approaches further pull in different directions: one asks to disentangle Indian circumstances and specificities from European definitions, the other invites us to think empire in a connected global way. Notwithstanding the respective merits, both views, in my understanding, are based upon inadequate engagement with *historical practices* of law, judicial processes and legal environment as they existed in precolonial times, a subject which is under-researched by historians of Mughal and late-Mughal India. For the former view, see Peter Robb, 'Labour in India 1860–1920: Typologies, Change and Regulation', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 4, no. 1, 1994, 37–66; Peter Robb, 'Introduction: Meanings of Labour in Indian Context', in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, ed. Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1–67; Anand V. Swamy, 'Law and Contract Enforcement in Colonial India', in *A New Economic History of Colonial India*, eds Latika Chaudhary, Bishnupriya Gupta, Tirthankar Roy and Anand V. Swamy (London: Routledge, 2016), 218–32. Michael Anderson's suggestion (made in 1990) to think about the question of continuity and change without falling into the trap of duality of tradition and modernity still seems valid. Unfortunately, in my reading, Anderson compromises his own nuanced understanding in one of his subsequent essays in which cultural institutions, such as

was concerned with and at times deeply embroiled in the mobilisation of men and material for constructing barracks, courts and bungalows. It was involved in perfecting a system based upon the trial-and-experiment phase of revenue administration that financed trading and urban expenditure. It was part of the emerging 'white sociability' in Calcutta that was based upon dependency on intermediaries and servants yet observed racial segregation with natives. And not least, it was concerned with the establishment of mixed-raced domesticities that was the site of affect and gruesome violence. These are few of the seams of the canvas on which we need to draw the intersecting lines of family, domesticity, law, labour and imperialism. This realignment of the historical gaze is best served, in my view, through the framework of the 'servant problem'.<sup>24</sup>

It is so because 'servant problem' is at the heart of the making of European society in Calcutta and in other presidency towns. There is no sequential development where the British society was already in place and then a 'servant problem' arose. In contrast, the 'servant problem' encapsulates multiple strands of anxiety and several attempts to intervene at the moment in which the 'ground rules' of European presence in the city and its relationship to the 'local society' were themselves laid down. So, the

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family and caste, emerge as categories of analysis *only* after he boldly states that the colonial state opted for non-interventionist approach; in fact, according to him, it did not even recognise the question of labouring relations. While the degree of (non) intervention by the colonial state is a privilege of the historian's judgement, which would vary, the interface of law and various forms of labour—military, construction, convict, transport, artisanal, masonry, carpentry and many more, including servants—is clearly visible in the archives from this period. What is required, as a way forward, is to *historicise* both the 'cultural institutions', as they came face-to-face with colonial sociology and legal interventions, as well as the state's legal mechanism to constantly remind ourselves of the 'messiness' of the historical practices as they developed through and around colonial legal interventions. As we need to unfreeze the culture (and not, not deal with it at all), we at the same time also need to go beyond the 'wordings' of regulation to understand the relationship between state, law and labour. Michael Anderson, 'Classifications and Coercions: Themes in South Asian Legal Studies in the 1980s', *South Asia Research* 10, no. 2, 1990, 163; Anderson, 'Work Construed'.

<sup>24</sup> Even if we narrowly think through legal legislation, this prehistory offers to revise our understanding that sees colonial intervention through law happening in either 1814 or 1819. These pieces of regulation appear to be legalising a practice that had already become common in the last 50 years.

servant problem at first sight suggests how the 'household work' would get organised. This being the case, it exposes at the same time the connections between the private and the public. The 'labour' for household had linkages to the market; it had to be procured from the market or through the networks of transaction between rural and urban spaces that organised itself through caste, region and, not least, again market.<sup>25</sup> The process of urbanisation that Calcutta underwent in the late eighteenth century created a situation where the labouring population tried to put itself in a better bargaining situation. This 'power of negotiation' was read as a problem. What follows below, therefore, is an account of the possible overlaps between what was seemingly a public labouring category, the coolie, and a privately hired servant. The set of regulations I look at both exposes the possibility of the overlap and betrays the anxiety of the colonial state to keep them segregated. The public labour, coolie, was being regulated and through that defined at the same time when the domestic servant was being identified and privatised. Both were discussed in the mirror of each other. All this happened in the context of the urban growth of Calcutta.

## THE CITY

Britons began living and practising their trade in Calcutta on a firmer footing at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Their history as well as that of the place as a cluster of villages goes further back in time, however.<sup>26</sup> As Farhat Hasan succinctly put it, Calcutta was not produced overnight by the touch of the English 'magic-wand'.<sup>27</sup> It was already populated with a variety of working groups, merchants and weavers long before Britons gained political and financial control in the 1760s.

Empiricists might discount legends as 'puerile' and 'silly' but they are invaluable even in their alleged 'incorrectness', if one wishes to trace the

<sup>25</sup> On the reach of the market in eighteenth-century Bengal, see Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-Century Bengal: Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Rama Deb Roy, 'Glimpses on the History of Calcutta, 1600–1800', *Annales de démographie historique* 1, 1988, 243–57.

<sup>27</sup> Farhat Hasan, 'Indigenous Cooperation and the Birth of a Colonial City: Calcutta, c. 1698–1750', *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 1, 1992, 65–82.

imprints of 'social subaltern' in the city's anecdotal past.<sup>28</sup> One legend that explains how Calcutta got its name goes like this: the first Englishman who landed there met with a grass-cutter and inquired about the name of the place. The obscurity of the English language confused the grass-cutter. He thought the gentleman was inquiring about the load on his head. He replied in a broken pidgin way: 'kal kata', that is, he had cut the grass yesterday. The Englishman gave the place the name Calcutta.<sup>29</sup> Another anecdote is related to *dhobis* (washermen), who had already by the 1780s earned infamy for damaging and misplacing the clothes of their masters.<sup>30</sup> The anecdote was first narrated in an 1830 text and then repeated in one from 1905. When the English arrived in Calcutta in 1620, they required translators and interpreters.<sup>31</sup> In Madras, these men were called *dubas/dubhasis*, meaning one who knows two languages. So, in Bengal the English sought the same. The Bengali elite families to whom the request was made misinterpreted *dubhasis* as *dhobis*. They sent *dhobis* instead. As a result, anecdotally, it was believed that in Calcutta the washermen were the first service group who picked up some rudimentary English. One of them, Ratan Sarkar, was reportedly the first interpreter employed by the EIC.<sup>32</sup>

The power of these anecdotes shows the central presence of 'social-subaltern' in the city life which was being overwritten. In the nineteenth century, the Ramjan Ostager Lane was renamed into Madanmohan Datta's Lane, Ostager being a famous tailor in the early nineteenth century and Datta, the *diwan* (chief manager) to the collector of Calcutta and salt agent

<sup>28</sup> These phrases are of P. Thankappan Nair in Nair, ed., *Rainey's: A Historical and Topographical Sketch of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985), 6; and Nair, *Calcutta in the 17th Century* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1986), 33.

<sup>29</sup> Raja Binaya Krishna Deb, *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta* (Calcutta, 1905), 27.

<sup>30</sup> As pointed out in the public advertisement of Messrs. J. Davidson and Co., the firm that opened in November 1787 promised to have procured sufficient materials and workmen to do washing and mangling according to the European method. W. S. Seton-Karr, *Selections from Calcutta Gazettes*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1864), 227–28.

<sup>31</sup> The date is according to the legend and might or might not correspond to the empirical fact. Calcutta's foundation date is 1698 but repeated attempts were made in the earlier decades to open a factory in Bengal and Bihar.

<sup>32</sup> Krishna Deb, *The Early History*, 58.

of another district. The municipal decision was based on substituting 'respectable' ways of knowing the city with memories left by 'lowly people'. Some lanes and bye-lanes have survived this change, giving us a fleeting glimpse into the city life organised around services: there is a Chhidam Mudi Lane and a Panchi Dhobani Gali.<sup>33</sup> *Mudi* (or variously written as Moodies and Modis) were grocers, who the European officials suspected were in connivance with syces for supplying poor quality of gram for horses at higher prices. *Dhobani*, or *dhobin*, was the washerwoman, who otherwise remained invisible behind her husband, the dhobi, in the list of menial servants prepared by colonial regulations, but was visible in city spaces and visuals, reminding us that they were equal to their men as 'workers'.<sup>34</sup>

The 'pidgin' encounters as well as the traces of service providers in the city show both the power of misapprehension and the possibility of social upward mobility that might have opened up for a few groups, mainly those who traded and those who provided service.<sup>35</sup> It is no surprise that the first person the British man came in contact with was a grass-cutter; they were one of the two most numerous menial groups in late eighteenth-century Calcutta. The other were palanquin-bearers, who were known for their dominant and defiant solidarity.<sup>36</sup> A much detailed

<sup>33</sup> Banerjee, 'The World of Ramjan Ostagar', 77, 84.

<sup>34</sup> The point about invisibilisation of women categories has been made in greater detail in Nitin Sinha, 'Who is (not) a Servant, Anyway? Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, forthcoming, 2020. On the dissonance of textual and visual depictions related to 'family' as a unit of labour, also see G. Arunima, 'Bonds of Love, Ties of Kinship? Or Are There Other Ways of Imagining the Family', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 53, no. 3, 2016, 1–22.

<sup>35</sup> For, this period was also characterised as *inquilab* (revolution) by the Persianate literati who were part of the bureaucracy of the fading Bengal nawab rulership. The term, meaning revolution, symbolised decline in the fate of this aristocratic-bureaucratic class but also referred to the rise of the new monied groups under the 'new' political culture, which Britons were introducing. Kumkum Chatterjee, 'History as Self-representation: The Recasting of a Political Tradition in Late Eighteenth-Century Eastern India', *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 4, 1998, 913–48.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta', in *The Urban Experience, Calcutta: Essays in Honour of Professor Nitish R. Ray*, ed. Pradip Sinha (Calcutta: Riddhi-India, 1987), 23–24. Most of the palanquin-bearers had come from Balasore, a place in neighbouring state of Orissa, and also from Bihar. From time to time, their collective withdrawal created a dearth of bearers in the city. Nair, *Rainey's*, 76.

research is still required but sketchy references from a variety of sources suggest that palanquin-bearers worked in caste groups and retained their strong regional identities. Between 1760s and 1830s, they frequently struck work, bringing the itinerant and restless empire to periodic halts. Their strong bargaining power allowed them to work as 'private servants' on weekdays and as unattached service providers ready to be hired from the bazaar on weekends. What was experienced and described as a 'problem' by the colonial officials was for palanquin-bearers the moment of bargain, resistance. Their ability to combine two work processes and hiring systems—private and public—drew upon caste- and region-based solidarity but used and perfected under colonial Calcutta's work regime.

Once again, it is important to keep in mind that the occupational trajectory of many of these service groups itself diversified in the early eighteenth century. Scribal groups participated in trading activities, for example, and some of them became formidable, wealthy *banians* (traders, money dealers, agents) with whom the British were associated.<sup>37</sup> The career of one Ramdulal De who was brought to the city by his grandparents is atypical for what he eventually rose to become but could also be illustrative of career paths of many others with varying levels of success from the position of being a dependent in a patron's house to becoming a patron himself. While his grandfather begged and grandmother worked as a cook in the house of Madanmohan Dutta, the diwan of the export warehouse of the EIC, Ramdulal De picked up some accounting and Persian with the diwan's sons.<sup>38</sup> Later, he became the leading partner in the Indo-

<sup>37</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 47, no. 4, 2010, 445–72; Peter J. Marshall, 'Masters and Banians in Eighteenth-Century Calcutta', in *Trade and Conquest: Studies on the Rise of British Dominance in India*, P. J. Marshall (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> In 1759, some 200 upper-caste beggars had petitioned the English East India Company (EIC) to ensure that they keep receiving daily alms from shopkeepers, a practice allowed to them by a Company *sunnud* (deed) in the past. Ramsundar Biswas, the grandfather, could have been one of them. James Long, *Selections from the Unpublished Records of the Government*, no. 419, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1869), 184. Being a diwan of the Company export warehouse in Calcutta was a very lucrative job. Dutta must have commanded a great deal of authority and money to attract and maintain servants and dependents. The story of Ramdulal De-Sarkar is based on a useful online resource, <https://puronokolkata.com>.



American trade. He added 'Sarkar' to his name, a high-caste honorific title, and proclaimed that coffers could buy caste.<sup>39</sup> Ratanlal, the washerman, probably would have thought the same when he added Sarkar to his name.

Calcutta in the late eighteenth century was the administrative centre of the emerging British rule, with a variety of revenue, judicial, trading and private mercantile offices. The attendants, retainers and servant-like characters moved between private and public employment. This was true for a class of 'boys' who accompanied *munshis* (scribes, linguists, account keepers, language instructors) or *kerranies* (clerks, writers, copyists) or other similar superior 'servants'.<sup>40</sup> These boys carried their masters' writing apparatuses, hookahs and spittoons, and held umbrellas for them. While doing these odd jobs they picked up some Persian, learned to read and write sufficiently to obtain jobs on their masters' recommendation. Some of them, according to Charles D'Oyly, raised 'themselves into very comfortable and distinguished situations'.<sup>41</sup>

The social reality of upward mobility as presented above does not mean that society in itself had no, at least normative, system of classification of servants and service providers. There was indeed a hierarchy, a strong one, within the category of servants or, even precisely speaking, the category

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com/2016/09/07/ramdulal-dey-the-millionaire-bengal-merchant-1752-1825/ (accessed on 18 November 2017). Also see Susan S. Bean, 'Calcutta Banians for the American Trade: Portraits of Early Nineteenth-Century Bengali Merchants in the Collections of the Peabody Museum, Salem and the Essex Institute', in *Changing Visions, Lasting Images: Calcutta Through 300 Years*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1990), 69–80.

<sup>39</sup> Shekhar Bandhopadhyaya, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), 54. On the possibility of this upward social mobility, also see S. N. Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 1, 1975, 59–80. This example also shows the malleability of the use of the caste titles even if their meaning in the social hierarchy was well-defined.

<sup>40</sup> A history of the term, boy, is also overlaid with usages emerging from different contexts: the British use in terms of camp follower, the Portuguese use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as *boy de sombrero* (carrying umbrella), *boy de palanquy* (carrying palanquin), and Marathi *bhoi*, a caste of people who carried palanquins. Henry Yule and Arthur Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, ed. William Crooke (London: J. Murray, 1903), xxii, 109–11.

<sup>41</sup> Charles D'Oyly, *The European in India* (London: Orme, 1813), texts accompanying plate 1.



FIGURE 8.1: A Monshee (Persian reader)

Courtesy: © British Library Board, Hindostanee Drawings, Add. Or. 121–170, British Library.

of domestic servants. First, among those broadly classified as servants, there were two groups, *naukar* and *chakar*. Similar to the French case in which scribes, clerks, secretaries, farm managers and a host of similar professional groups were considered upper-class servants, occupational groups in India such as banians, *shroffs* (the *sarraf* of the Mughal times, meaning moneylenders/changers), *munshis*, clerks, *chobdars* (mace bearers) and *khansamans* (house stewards/butlers/head cooks) belonged to the *naukar* group (upper-class servants).<sup>42</sup> In contrast to *naukars* were

<sup>42</sup> For the French hierarchical system, see R. Sarti, 'Freedom and Citizenship? The Legal Status of Servants and Domestic Workers in a Comparative Perspective (16th–21st Centuries)', in *Proceedings of the Servant Project*, eds Suzy Pasleau and Isabelle Schopp, with Raffaella Sarti, 5 vols, vol. 3 (Liège: Éditions de l'Université de Liège, 2005 (but 2006)). In 1792, these groups ceased to be considered as servants in distinction from farm workers and wage-earners, which included domestic servants.

chakars, those who performed menial services. The number of these servants in a well-to-do household generally ranged between 20 and 30 but could, in fact, be higher.<sup>43</sup> They included *khidmutgars* (table attendants), bearers, *aabdars* (water coolers), barbers, cooks, tailors, washermen, *marshalchies* (link boys/torch-bearers), syces (horse groomers), grass-cutters, *mehtars* (sweepers, waste cleaners), bheesties, *malis* (gardeners), *durwans* (doorkeepers/guards), *doorias* (dog keepers) and additionally, in European households, ayahs.<sup>44</sup> Williamson provided a comprehensive list of naukars and chakars found in both European and native households. Based on whether or not they performed menial duties, his list included nine naukars and thirty chakars.<sup>45</sup>

The British presence in Calcutta led to the expansion in demand for various types of services. Under the EIC's zamindari, between the periods 1713–17 and 1743–47, the revenues from markets and marts, and grounds and houses, increased by 80 per cent. An exact count has eluded historians for generations, but in all likelihood the population of Calcutta, including nearby areas, grew from 30,000 in 1704 to 500,000 by the end

<sup>43</sup> In two leading native merchant households of Danish settlement Serampore, the number of servants was around 50 each; see Simon Rastén's chapter in this volume. In the 1770s, Philip Frances had written to John Burke: 'Here I live, master of the finest house in Bengal, with a hundred servants, a country house, and spacious gardens, horses and carriages, yet so perverse is my nature, that the devil take me if I would not exchange the best dinner and the best company I ever saw in Bengal for a beefsteak and claret at the Horn, and let me choose my company.' H. E. Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta: Being Chiefly Reminiscences of the Days of Warren Hastings, Francis, and Impey* (London: W. Thacker, first published 1882, fourth enlarged edition 1908), 120. What needs to be kept in mind is that the figure of the 100 might be a rhetorical expression, which precisely tells us about the (colonial) masterly mindset of treating a lot of subordinate people around him, stretched from his office to home, as servants.

<sup>44</sup> Ayahs and *dhyes* (wet nurses) were only employed in European households when the male European had a European wife (that is, maintained a family) or had established a household based on *bibi*-companionship. Writing for Europeans in India, D'Oyly confirms that 'women are never employed in any domestic situation, except in the *zenonah*'. D'Oyly, *The European in India*, text accompanying plate 6.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Williamson, *The East India Vade-Mecum; or, Complete Guide to Gentlemen Intended for the Civil, Military, or, Naval Service of the Hon. East India Company*, 2 vols, Vol. 1 (London: Black, Parry, and Kingsbury, 1810), 186–87.

of the century.<sup>46</sup> The intersecting point of service and servanthood, or of being a service provider and a servant, has to be located in the expansion of commercial activities, emergence of new political economy of colonial rule and what Peter Marshall has called the 'building boom'.<sup>47</sup> Not all service providers ranging from banians to syces were strictly speaking domestic servants, that is, only exclusively working in the domain of the 'private'. Many servant *categories* occupied places in both public and private. *Munshis* worked in offices as well as privately as language instructors to young cadets coming to India. But because of their elevated status, they were also often described as the 'head of the servants'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the leading banian of Calcutta, Nobkissen who played a pivotal role in the political and economic dealings of the Company state, also managed his master Lord Clive's household. The list of cash accounts between Clive and Nobkissen for January 1767, just before Clive departed from India the next month, for instance, tells us that Nobkissen discharged bills of tailors, 'Portuguese boys', Madras servants (for their house rent and clothes), 'keepers', general servants, a 'slave boy' and other charges related to birds and dogs. He was also responsible for clearing 'table expenses' that included liquors, cheese, pickles, hock and sugar candies as well as 'bazaar charges'. The other payments included 'milk cow charges' and 'farm yard charges'.<sup>49</sup>

The banians, sircars, shroffs and *munshis* were those groups and individuals that collaborated with the English rule, provided cover for the *benami* (nameless) private trade of the Company officials, helped translate Sanskrit and Persian texts for administration and justice, ran the households of their European masters as 'head servants' and in turn also maintained their own extended households and systems of patronage and dependents. Calcutta was, however, not only the city of the likes of Clive, Hastings and Nobkissen but also of servants, coolies, workmen, prostitutes, French fugitives, Portuguese pirates, international seamen and the British 'low and licentious' who spent their nights in punch houses and taverns.

<sup>46</sup> This might be an inflated figure as population census in the 1830s put the figure around 250,000. There is a lot of confusion on this matter; any precise number is elusive.

<sup>47</sup> P. J. Marshall, 'The White Town of Calcutta Under the Rule of the East India Company', *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 2, 2000, 315.

<sup>48</sup> D'Oyly, *The European in India*, text accompanying plate 1.

<sup>49</sup> Verelst Collection, Mss Eur F218/14, folio no. 8, British Library.

The 'black market' of Calcutta included arrack and *taari* (country liquor) shops which, besides serving alcohol, also worked as a business avenue for the social underbelly of 'global subalterns', comprising of 'stealers' and buyers of all sorts, including 'all descriptions of domestic servants'.<sup>50</sup> Silver cutlery and madeira wine tell us about the 'white sociability' but when they appeared in the bazaar and taverns, in shops and alleys, and behind the bungalows, they tell us about the 'servant sociability', a sociability which was a 'problem' for the colonial administration.<sup>51</sup>

The Justices of the Peace were incessant in their criticism of the police efforts in improving the city's law and order. Measures for the regulation of bazaars were taken. Not only the space was to be regulated, the time itself came under the watch. Night patrolling was put in place. Movements had to be monitored. *Kotwals* (native police subordinates) had to keep an account of all householders and families and report on any stranger coming into the division as an occasional sojourner or a resident. In bazaars and at households, servants were once again the prime suspects for thefts or for facilitating thefts.

But who were these servants? We have seen above that for the upper group, the naukhar, the household-based service was not the only possibility of employment or livelihood. For boatmen and palanquin-bearers also, both public and private hiring was common. They were both 'service providers' and 'servants' although dissociating the linkages was precisely

<sup>50</sup> Reginald C. Sterndale, *An Historical Account of 'The Calcutta Collectorate'* (Calcutta: West Bengal Government Press, 1959), 57. The advertisements on absconding 'black servants' and 'slave boys' mentioned valuables they had run away with together with a clause 'if offered for sale'. Such sales of valuables like gold chains and seals or watches and snuff box happened at pawn shops or in the 'black market' of Calcutta. Seton-Karr, *Selections*, vol. 1, 120; W. S. Seton-Karr, *Selections from Calcutta Gazettes*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1865), 498–99, 532–33; *Bengal Zemindary Court Proceedings*, 1766, mentioned of pawning in some cases under the date entry of 1 July 1766. P/155/71, British Library.

<sup>51</sup> This theme of regulation, not only of wages but also of the city space, commodities and services, as a way to discover the servants' imprints outside of the household and also crucially to think of the regulation as becoming part of the everyday life is dealt with in greater detail in Nitin Sinha, 'Under the Shadow of Regulations', paper presented at the panel, 'Regulating Domestic Service and Colonialism', European Social Science History Congress, Belfast, 3–7 April 2018.

the crux of the 'servant problem'. Similarly, for some categories of the chakar group also, private hire was not the only option. Syces, bheesties, darzees, bearers, grass-cutters, sweepers, washermen—they all worked under private hire as menial servants and also with other institutions such as army, in public offices as well as independently in the bazaar. A big section of the lower grade servants was hired from the pool of the urban labouring group (and we must not forget the *munshis*' boys or the khansaman's coolies who might have started as errand boys and moved up the ladder of the occupational category).<sup>52</sup> It was this linkage between public and private hire, between bazaar and home, between the city's expansion creating opportunities for a labour market and the colonial anxiety to keep this labour force under control that gets reflected in the resolutions. Chiefly targeting servants, these resolutions betray the possibilities of a history of the overlap between the coolie and the servant. The collusion of law, labour and privatised dependencies is what we turn to now.

## COOLIES AND SERVANTS: OVERLAPPING DISTINCTIONS

Very few historians have written specifically on eighteenth-century Calcutta labour. Notable amongst them are P. J. Marshall and Kaustubh Sengupta, whose works are separated by more than a quarter of a century.<sup>53</sup> Their writings focus primarily on coolies. To his credit, Marshall has looked at coolies and servants together, but with greater attention to the former. His central argument is that the Calcutta hinterlands failed to provide an adequate number of coolies as was required to cater to the 'building boom' of the city. His second argument is of direct relevance for this essay. He argues that there existed a strict classification and separation between different types of labour such as craftsmen, coolies and unskilled coolies. He does not say it in so many words, but if logically extended, his argument

<sup>52</sup> Usually, khansamans used to engage a boy coolie or servant to help them carry provisions from the market. Sometimes, these boys were under the general retinue of the household servant, sometimes hired from the market for the job.

<sup>53</sup> Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies'; Kaustubh Sengupta, 'The New Fort William and the Dockyard: Constructing Company's Calcutta in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Studies in History* 32, no. 2, 2016, 231–56.

would imply that such strict segregation also existed between coolies and domestic servants. Sengupta concentrates solely on coolies and offers a mild criticism of Marshall, saying that the wage and work regulation initiated by the Company state in prohibiting private employment of certain categories of craftsmen and coolies explains the inadequacy of the labour supply. In other words, the reason for the inadequate supply need not be looked for in the existing structures of the agrarian hinterland, as Marshall does, but can be found in the policies of the Company state.

Both scholars, Sengupta more than Marshall, have left out the servants. That is not to suggest that those working on the history of coolies must say something about servants. But sources do strongly indicate that their paths intersected and that the state's regulative attempts recognised it. The historian's inability to do so betrays a historiographical preference to readily discover labour which is in the public sphere. The binary of public and coolie on the one hand, and servant and household on the other, is thus created.<sup>54</sup> The servant-coolie conundrum, although short-lived in the context of urban Calcutta, promises to challenge this.

In May 1759, at a meeting of the quorum of 'zemindars' of Calcutta town, three members—Richard Becher, William Frankland and John Zephaniah Holwell—proposed a set of eight measures to the governor and the council.<sup>55</sup> Reflecting the spirit of the 'united complaints of the inhabitants', these measures proposed to regulate the wages and work of 'menial servants'. The 24 categories of servants who came under the regulation were all chakars, with the exception of khansamans and chobdars, who were kept in the list because of their quintessential employment in European households with other chakars. The intention behind this government resolution was to regulate 'servants in private service'. This clause was important because many of the naukars and chakars, as argued above, were also employed in public institutions. Thus, by fixing wages and laying out the terms and conditions of the master-servant relationship, the regulation itself can be seen as delineating the boundary of the private.

The basic points in the regulation were as follows. If a servant

<sup>54</sup> The setting of urban Madras has allowed exceptions; servants have been discussed as part of the larger urban pool. Ahuja, 'Origins of Colonial Labour'.

<sup>55</sup> Long, *Selections*, 181–84; Bengal Public Consultations (hereafter BPC), P/1/31, 21 May 1759, 276–78, British Library.

demanding more than the stipulated rate or quit the service without a month's notice, s/he was liable to be punished at the Court of Zemindary. The punishment could include attachment of their land, banishment with their family from the settlement, fine, imprisonment and corporal punishment at the discretion of the Court of Zemindary.<sup>56</sup> Unlike what happened almost a century later in plantations, the masters were not given any express liberty of private arrest. If a master hired a servant on more than the prescribed rate, he forfeited the right of redressal at the court. Further, if he ill-treated his servant, the latter was 'entitled to redress and releasement from his service.' But the servant was required to prove it through 'regular complain' meaning that s/he could not quit the service on the plea of ill-treatment without proving a complaint (or more than one—the meaning of the term regular was left undefined) was made. The resolution presented a list of wages for each category of the servants to be put up in public places of the town in English, Persian, Bengali and Nagree (Hindi) and also announced by the beat of drum.<sup>57</sup>

Two unambiguous reasons were given for regulating servants: first, it was said that servants had become insolent, and second, that they had been demanding exorbitant wages. The exact reasons for why this had happened were not clear, but it was firmly believed that the

root of these evils lie in our servants being admitted into the body of Sepoys, or received on the works of the new fortifications, and until the causes be removed by a positive prohibition from the President and Council, all attempts to redress their insolence and exaction will be rendered fruitless'.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The attachment of land is a small window to speculate that many or some of these servants held land in lieu of services provided, which was a common practice in Mughal period for various kinds of artisans. See Najaf Haider, 'Structure and Movement of Wages in the Mughal Empire, 1500–1700', in *Wages and Currency: Global Comparisons from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jan Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 298–99.

<sup>57</sup> In Britain there existed a long tradition of local magistrates given the power to set maximum wages and oversee the performance of the service relationship under the Statute of Artificers of 1563. Deakin, 'The Contract of Employment', 19. The expansion in wage employment was not typically a colonial feature; it had started happening in the earlier centuries. Haider, 'Structure and Movement of Wages'.

<sup>58</sup> Long, *Selections*, 181.



Sepoys stationed at markets and public buildings in their red coats and carrying bayonets symbolised power, which became the template for servants of other native elites. Coolies, employed in open public sites, perhaps were thought to carry the germ of defiance and disobedience. The social proximity between a sepoy (in the Company's employment) and a *sipahi* (native infantry), and the historical past of many such sipahis kept in private hire by zamindars and urban elites as armed retainers, explains why the slippage between sepoy and servant was possible (see Figure 8.2).

Coolie, on the other hand, was a generic term for one who provided waged manual labour. The term was also in use in the precolonial period.<sup>59</sup> One could become and un-become a coolie depending on work, worksite and mode of payment. The term was already in use as a 'suffix' for some domestic servants, such as punkah coolie/bearer. The coolies that were brought to Calcutta to work on the fortification were *ryots*, that is, agricultural labourers. They 'became' coolies at the site of the fortification and repossessed the identity of farm labourers once back in the fields during the harvest season. The *fakirs* (religious mendicants with commercial interests in this period) who were arrested in Dacca were to be 'employed as coolies in the repair of the factory'.<sup>60</sup> Pressing prisoners on public-military works was a norm; and hence the interchangeable use of coolies and convicts could have happened. But the Company and its officials also suffered from paranoia. They needed to make the categories self-evident and the meanings stable. Coolies, sepoys and servants needed to be distinct and demarcated.

Regulation was a means for doing so. In March 1760, another resolution regarding servants was passed. The previous wage scale was confirmed. More importantly, it reiterated that 'no menial servants, such as khitmutgars, musalchees, grass-cutters, peons, & c., usually employed in the service of the inhabitants, be received as coolies on the new works or admitted as sepoys'.<sup>61</sup>

And again, six years later, a third resolution came into force.<sup>62</sup> Three resolutions within a period of 10 years show that, at least for the European

<sup>59</sup> Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 249–51.

<sup>60</sup> Long, *Selections*, 342.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>62</sup> Long, *Selections*, 446; BPC, P/1/39, 9 June 1766, 480.



FIGURE 8.2: Confectioners Shop

Courtesy: © British Library Board, Wellesley Album, Add. Or. 1098-1235, British Library.

residents of Calcutta, there was indeed a ‘servant problem.’<sup>63</sup> The fact that the last resolution was proposed by the Committee of Inspection, which was formed the same year (1766) to supervise public works and deal with matters of payment to lascars and coolies, attests that the ‘servant problem’ was not just a ‘private’ matter of households but was part of the Company state’s attempt to regulate a variety of labouring groups. The same wages from previous resolutions were approved. The new element

<sup>63</sup> Preventing servants from being admitted as coolies and sepoys might be read as the measures proposed due to the felt shortage of labour for the work of fortification but knowing that Calcutta had a variety of castes and occupational service providers already settled, and in the following decades many more people kept coming to the city in search of work, the factor of ‘shortage’ of domestic servants is at least untenable given the current level of research. In other sources also, such as letters and diaries, there is no mention of servants’ shortage in this period. In contrast, for the specific work of fortification, the shortage of coolies was often reported.

in this resolution, however, was the proposal to set up 'a Register of all servants of every denomination in Calcutta'. One Mr Stuart, along with an assistant named Mr Gideon Johnstone, was appointed to the office. The seriousness of the matter was evident, as the officials were directed to present the proceedings of the office every Monday to the Board.<sup>64</sup>

Let us turn our attention to the other character of the story, the coolie, which brings us back to the city space one more time. After the victory at the Battle of Plassey, the Company state started building a new fort (1757–75). It required men and material, some were directly arranged, some through a variety of contracts and some through sheer coercion applied through native rulers. There were many other construction and public works under progress in this period in different towns of Bengal presidency, which required the labour of coolie, but since servant resolutions referred directly to fortification work in Calcutta, we look at what was happening with coolies there.

In April 1760 (just a month after the second servant resolution), it was estimated that around one-sixth of the people presenting themselves as coolies at the fort were in fact not employed as coolies in the first place but had infiltrated the coolie rank during the evening muster to receive daily wages. To prevent this, sepoys were positioned at stores and other places in the fort to prohibit the in-and-out movement of every 'single black fellow' without a pass before the muster. Failure to return the basket or any other tool given in the morning invited forfeiture of the day's wage.<sup>65</sup>

The mode of payment was an important instrument of control. The practice of daily wage and evening muster was newly introduced for this purpose. Prior to this, coolies were brought in by *sardars* (headmen) and paid on a monthly basis. Furthermore, the *sardars* brought them on the basis of advance payment. Allegedly, the monthly wage system had encouraged coolies to leave work early. The system also required a full retinue of account keepers such as *sircars* and *banians* that added to the cost of the establishment. In order to reduce the cost of fortification

<sup>64</sup> BPC, P/1/39, 9 June 1766, 480.

<sup>65</sup> Long, *Selections*, 212–13. The mode of payment of the wage itself had become the reason for desertion. The copper coinage in which coolies were paid was exchanged at a lesser value in the bazaar, thus causing a decline in the real value of workers' wage. Long, *Selections*, 211–12.

and to improve the supply of coolies, magistrates and revenue farmers from outside Calcutta started directly sending coolies.<sup>66</sup> With this also came the change to the daily wage system to control coolies better and check infiltration.<sup>67</sup>

The 'pergunnah coolies', as the outsiders were called, were largely agricultural labourers. In January 1758, while banning private inhabitants from hiring artificers, it was reasoned that with proper encouragement a sufficient number of coolies could be procured after the paddy harvest was over.<sup>68</sup> The fact that coolies (and not just artificers and other skilled labour such as bricklayers) received advances and higher wages from private inhabitants was known to the administration, but it decided to wait before preventing them from hiring coolies.<sup>69</sup> The Company was confronted with two problems: first, the possibility of overlaps between labouring identities, and second, the differential mode of hiring and payment adopted by itself and private inhabitants for a number of working groups such as artificers, carpenters, bricklayers and coolies.

The paddy harvest did not solve the 'coolie problem'. In spite of the revenue farmers' recourse to the system of advance payment of a month's wage (similar to sardars), coolies did not come into Calcutta in adequate numbers. At first, revenue farmers were penalised for not sending the contracted number, but later on, not only was the penalty withdrawn but their advance investment was also reimbursed.<sup>70</sup> The district collectors criticised the whole system of coolie procurement which, according to them, was based on force.<sup>71</sup> To quote in full:

... for it is notorious that none will work on the new fortifications who are not compelled by force, when at the same time an individual may be [*sic*] get any number he wants at the same price as the Company allows. The farmers (or the collector for them) is [*sic*] ready to send in the number contracted for

<sup>66</sup> In 1760, the Company ordered the collectors of different districts to procure 8,000 coolies. Long, *Selections*, 207.

<sup>67</sup> BPC, P/1/30, 30 September 1758, 333–36.

<sup>68</sup> BPC, P/1/30, 3 January 1758, 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> BPC, P/1/33, 2 March 1761, 174–75.

<sup>71</sup> Home Miscellaneous Proceeding Volume (hereafter HMPV), Vol. 23, March 1761, 24–25, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI).

whenever a method is found to engage them to stay on the works, but till that is done the bringing them by force many miles from their town habitations to which they will return in a few days or flee the country for fear of being laid hold on again, of which there are many instances, can answer no end but that of the destruction of the Company's *pergunnahs*.<sup>72</sup>

The Committee of Works asked the government to think of some other method. The shortage of coolies continued throughout the 1760s.<sup>73</sup> There is no denying that the Company state was using different instruments, from monthly advances to daily payments, from evening muster to wage fixation, to fulfil its labour demands, but all these measures, simply put, were unsuccessful.

The power of writing and cataloguing undergirds colonialism. This was as true for describing civilisations as for managing labour. In June 1766, the servants' registry was approved. A month earlier, the same had been applied to bricklayers and carpenters. According to one estimate, only 23 out of 900 or 1,000 bricklayers were left in the Company service. The rest had found work for higher wages with private inhabitants.<sup>74</sup> A regulation proposed in 1766 required all inhabitants to send in a list of the names of all workmen either belonging to Calcutta or engaged in the countryside. The company wanted a comprehensive registry of workmen. Fearing a public backlash, the public notice had to add the caveat: 'it is not our Intention to deprive the Inhabitants of the Workmen now engaged in their Service'.<sup>75</sup>

The Company state struggled to find the right balance between public works and the liberty of private hire and employment. In February 1768, the non-availability of coolies for carrying out work was described as 'an unsurmountable obstacle'. And yet, the availability of coolies for private work at higher wages was noticed.<sup>76</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of coolies who came to Calcutta. Repeated references to their inadequate number might suggest it to have been insignificant. This was, however, not the case. In the same

<sup>72</sup> HMPV, Vol. 25, June–July 1761, 3–4.

<sup>73</sup> HMPV, 9 February 1767, No. 3.

<sup>74</sup> BPC, P/1/39, 19 May 1766, 397.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> BPC, P/1/43, 15 February 1768, 96.

month when the Committee of Works referred to it as an 'unsurmountable obstacle', there were 2,247 bricklayers and 5,819 coolies at work in the third week of February.<sup>77</sup> However, by May the number had declined to 292 and 2,020 respectively.<sup>78</sup> The supply was subject to agrarian cycle and the available quantity of building materials. But usually, the number of coolies ran into thousands. The shortage of coolies at the fort work was also felt because of other options available in the city. The opportunity for private employment finally forced the Company to pass an order restricting the construction of new buildings in or around Calcutta. Those already under way had to be registered, as also all workmen employed in their construction. The unregistered workmen had to be 'seized for the service of the public works'.<sup>79</sup>

Even 12 years into its construction and six years before it ended, the Company was still searching for ways to make the wages paid at the fort attractive, otherwise coolies found it 'more for [*sic*] their interest to be employed elsewhere *in the service of individuals*'.<sup>80</sup> Rather than raising wages, it instead provided a rice allowance. The logic behind not raising wages betrayed their attitude: it would make the 'labour of coolies a matter of choice than of necessity by enriching them too much'.<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, the Murshidabad ryots refused to come to Calcutta because the city had become very expensive. Coolies at fort work were paid Rs 3 per month and evidently more when hired privately. The wages of lower-grade servants (such as khidmutgars, head bearer and cook's mate) were fixed on an average at Rs 3 per month by the 1759, 1760 and 1766 resolutions. The monthly wages of other low-end naukars such as bearer, syce, peon, mashalchie, mali, grass-cutter and sweeper were fixed at less than Rs 3. Two possible scenarios could have emerged: one, the low-end naukars might have sought work at the fort as coolies in order to earn extra money in the ever-growing, expensive city. A wage of Rs 3 plus rice allowance would have made it attractive for them to 'become' a coolie.<sup>82</sup> However,

<sup>77</sup> BPC, P/1/43, 3 March 1768, 117–18.

<sup>78</sup> BPC, P/1/43, 4 May 1768, 83.

<sup>79</sup> BPC, P/1/43, 4 April 1768, 16.

<sup>80</sup> BPC, P/1/44, 14 November 1769, 809–10 (emphasis added).

<sup>81</sup> BPC, P/1/44, 14 November 1769, 810.

<sup>82</sup> We need to imagine here the nature of the labour market in which the ryots from

the reverse movement from being a bazaar coolie to working as a domestic servant was also possible, particularly once the fortification work stopped in 1775. By the 1780s, the wages of domestic servants had doubled (and for some tripled), and then remained stable for a long period.<sup>83</sup> This stability of the wages gets reflected in the shift of the register at which the 'servant problem' was discussed in the following decades. From wage the discussion shifted to policing, in which the superintendent of police, Calcutta, Thomas Motte, played a crucial role in devising plans for regulating servants. However, the urban impulse of the city both during the fortification work and afterwards kept open the option of the swap between the coolie and the servant, and vice versa. Working one season as a coolie, loading and unloading the cargo from ships arriving at Calcutta, and another as a bearer in a household must have remained a historical reality and strategy available to these social-subalterns in urban Calcutta.

## NEW BEGINNINGS

There are more ways than one in which to 'conclude' this chapter. We could elaborate upon the comparative assessment of the master-servant acts as they emerged in Britain and India almost around the same time in the mid-eighteenth century to tease out the 'colonial' specificity as well as imperial coevalness. We could alternatively follow up on the discussion on law and labour in early colonial India to assess the limitedness and vitality of the colonial rule on which scholarly positions seem to be sharply divided. Not the least, we could also end by suggesting that the coolie-servant conundrum was part of many other regulative mechanisms (extending to commodities, prices, bazaar, policing) that were being put in

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distant places denied to come or were forcibly sent to become coolies in Calcutta but those who were present in Calcutta (both coolies and servants) might have found it profitable to switch their roles between coolies and servants. Equally important to bear in mind is that this labour market was fractured or segmented not only because of rural and urban locations (and as colonial state blamed it on ryots' cultural apathy to migrate) but the segmentation was also an off-shoot of colonial regulations to identify, label and demarcate different kinds of labouring groups. Finally, the segregation was also a result of the attempt to divide 'public work' and 'private hire'.

<sup>83</sup> Home Public Proceedings, Serial No. 68, 3–28 March 1785, 227–231, NAI.

place along with the attempts to regulate wages and create stable meanings out of different overlapping labouring categories.

Drawing on the last point, one may ask, why this narrative could not be confined within the framework of the 'coolie problem'. One reason for not doing so is purely because of an avowed historiographical agenda. Presenting this narrative as a 'coolie problem' would have reproduced the lexical bias prioritising the history of the urban 'social-subaltern' under an assumed *public* labouring category of coolie. That would, in other words, have interiorised the already invisible category of domestic servants in our history writing. The fact that colonial regulations were already creating a wedge between different labouring forms has already influenced the historian's quest in the direction of the public sites of labour; subsuming servants under the category of coolies would have only strengthened that trend. After all, the colonial state faced both coolie and servant problems simultaneously, applied same kinds of mechanisms such as the registration to contain them, and discussed them together in a conjoined manner.

The second reason, however, is more rooted in the way this chapter has attempted to turn the phrase of 'servant problem' into an analytical category, which then allowed for the mapping of the interlinked histories of urban growth, labour demand, colonial political economy, the households and the bazaar. Domestic servants were part of the households but also recruited from the market. That this market must have organised itself through caste, ethnic and regional affiliations is not in question, although the degree of the interface is still not clear in the existing research. The fact that each of these entities, when in movement from the rural to the urban, must also have repositioned itself to suit the urban demands is highly probable but empirically not completely known.<sup>84</sup> Yet, a distinction has to be made between 'organisation of work' effected through, what at times is hastily mentioned as, 'cultural institutions' and 'structure of work', which in turn is too readily taken to be a point of break under colonial rule. In the 1760s, for instance, the colonial state directed a variety of service providers such as bricklayers, weavers, carpenters, braziers, smiths

<sup>84</sup> An insightful work here is of Aparna Balachandran in tracing the growth of 'petitions' as a mode of claim-making by urban labouring force in Madras. 'Christ and the Pariah: Colonialism, Religion and Outcast Labour in South India, 1780–1830' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2008).



and tailors to organise themselves under a headman (usually a caste or a village leader of that particular occupation).<sup>85</sup> However, it also directed them to install a meticulous hierarchy of authority within each of these groups situated in district towns based on the maintenance of books, grant of licences, order of reporting, etc.—all supposedly to be finally placed at the Governor Council in Calcutta. The fascination with registration—of servants, coolies and all sorts of other social-subalterns—is the fascination for the paperwork which was seen as a substitute for the lack of, what the contemporary natives with experience in Mughal and post-Mughal bureaucracy defined as, ‘virtuous form’ of government.<sup>86</sup>

I will end with a speculative proposal. As we have tried to sketch a long history of the master–servant relationships in this volume, it only fits well with that ambition not to leave the early colonial period at the altar of legal regulations alone; that is, not just to argue that domestic servants now increasingly came under the operational mechanism of law. It was still a relationship of ties and remained so well into the mature phase of colonialism.<sup>87</sup> In Britain, the philosophical understanding of this relationship from Locke to Adam Smith went hand in hand with the

<sup>85</sup> Long, *Selections*, 97.

<sup>86</sup> Although the Persian scholars of the late eighteenth century wrote with the hope of securing the patronage of the Company state, they also critiqued it for not keeping up to the Mughal moral ideals of governance. Of course, it meant that scholars like themselves ought not to be sidelined in the new Company bureaucracy, but through this critique they also drove home the point that the rule should be morally committed to mitigate the suffering of a wide cross-section of the people. This critique of the Company’s idioms of governance came about at the same time when the distrust of subordinate native officials recast the ideology of the rule, leading to ‘domination of strangers’. See Kumkum Chatterjee, ‘History as Self-Representation’, and Jon Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). On the value of ‘paperreality’ as integrally changing the nature of rule, see Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>87</sup> While arguing that ‘regulation of labour and employment shaped Calcutta lives’, Peter Robb has recently also suggested that contract and law were inhibited by traditional law and forms of labour organisation. According to him, the accent was more on household management, in which trust and sentiment played a bigger role than contractual relations. Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden’s Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), Ch. 3.

legal developments on the questions of wage, contract and employment.<sup>88</sup> The trajectories of such ethical and moral conducts on what constituted service had diverse sources in the Indian context (dharmashastric, *akhlaqi* and *fatawa*-legalistic) with their different accents on the doses of love, generosity, benevolence and chastisement. If we go back to one of the dharmashastric texts, the *Manusmriti*, we will find there were elaborate codes about how shudras, when found defaulting, must pay fines and bear corporeal punishment. Incidentally, 'defaulting' included any act of commission or omission on the part of the shudras that their social 'superiors' might read as offensive. The brahman, on the other hand, would not be punished for 'mishandling the Sudra'.<sup>89</sup> A long shot it indeed is to end the narrative of the eighteenth century with an invocation of *Manusmriti*, a text of early India, but the design of modern law in relation to servants, that is, the criminal prosecution for servants on the one hand and civil fines for masters on the other, was in essence not different from what was prescribed more than a thousand years ago.<sup>90</sup> And if questions could be raised on how strictly such codes were followed in the past (after all, as some people argue it was just a book of codes and not a law book), then it must not surprise us that colonial regulations were also not entirely successful. The registration of servants remained a dream which the state found hard to forget but difficult to realise. The wages, contrary to the prescriptions of the 1759 regulation, had doubled by the 1780s. And, rather than blacklisting the defaulting servants, the European masters and mistresses often rehired the fired servants because the latter, in spite of being 'thieves and rogues', knew the ways of running those particular households.

In this dependency of the masters, the manoeuvrable invocation of the language of servitude on the part of the servants that had long become part of the ethical mooring is remarkable. In an imaginary dialogue book written for the European newcomers, the author started with a chapter

<sup>88</sup> Steedman, 'The Servant's Labour'.

<sup>89</sup> Chitra Tiwari, *Sudras in Manu* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), 62.

<sup>90</sup> Almost all *dharmashastras*, including those produced as late as the seventeenth century, reproduced provisions like these *ad infinitum* citing *Manusmriti*. I owe this point to Pankaj Jha.

called ‘Hiring Servants’.<sup>91</sup> This is a bi-lingual text written in Bengali and English. Servants, while seeking forgiveness (when they were about to be punished), changed the register of self-address from *chakar* to *ghulam*. This was in keeping with the tradition present in the seventeenth century, as pointed out by Sunil Kumar, that a *naukar* who considered himself superior to a *ghulam* (literally, slave) still professed his loyalty in these terms: ‘I am your *naukar* but I will serve you like a *ghulam*.’<sup>92</sup> The ‘servant problem’ promises to locate the overlapping sites of hierarchical social relationships by allowing us to bring different historicised facets of law, culture, language, urbanity, colonial political economy and state within a linked fold of analytical field.

<sup>91</sup> William Carey, *Dialogues Intended to Facilitate the Acquiring of the Bengalee Language*, 3rd edn, 1818; 1st edn, 1801 (Serampore: Mission Press).

<sup>92</sup> Part of his presentation at the conference ‘Servants’ Pasts’, Delhi, 11–13 February 2017.

# Can Historians Speak?

## A Few Thoughts and Proposals on a Possible Global History of Domestic Service/Work

RAFFAELLA SARTI

### INTRODUCTION

Addressing an issue as huge as that of a possible global history of domestic service/work within a necessarily short discussion is an almost impossible task, akin to trying to fit an ocean into a bottle.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, I take up this challenge in the hope of making at least a small contribution towards an immense scholarly endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

For my intervention, I have chosen a title that echoes the influential and controversial article by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'<sup>3</sup> I find her title inspiring because it highlights the possibility that some individuals may not speak. According to Spivak, 'the subaltern cannot speak': while dealing with servants and domestic workers, we thus might discuss whether they could/can speak. However, this question—

<sup>1</sup> English revision by Clelia Boscolo, University of Birmingham, and Elizabeth Stone. On such an issue see José C. Moya, 'Domestic Service in a Global Perspective: Gender, Migration, and Ethnic Niches', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, no. 4, 2007, 559–79; Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Silke Neunsinger, eds, *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Mainly referring to the past, I will use the terms servants and domestic service more often than domestic work and domestic workers, which will be preferred while speaking about the present.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously in such a short intervention there is no room for extensive bibliographical references.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

although crucial—is only partially dealt with in this Interjection. Here, I would rather focus on historians, that is, on people who, both for their social background and for their social status, cannot generally be considered subaltern.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as argued by Carolyn Steedman, their activity, that is, writing history (since it largely deals with dead people), in a sense is an intrinsically ‘imperialistic’ endeavour.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, they often have problems in ‘speaking’. Thus, I want to focus on this common problem that historians have to face and that seems particularly serious in studying domestic service/work, and even more so if they—we—want to develop a comparative perspective on a global level or to contribute to a possible global history of domestic service/work.

Historians work with a variety of sources produced in the past. Written sources use a vocabulary that is inevitably different from our current one. They may be written in a different language from the one used by the historian. They are sometimes written in a ‘dead’ language. Even if they are written in a language that is still alive, some terms may no longer be used, others may continue to exist but their meanings may have changed. On the other hand, the terms used by historians often did not exist in the past, or, if they existed, may have had different meanings, so using them may create (involuntary) anachronisms. This is all rather trivial. However, it is important to note that it implies a first level of translation from one language into another. Yet, if we want to compare different cases across time

<sup>4</sup> Historians focusing on servants and domestic workers are likely to belong to the employers’ rather than to the domestic workers’ social groups, and to be themselves employers of domestic workers, even though their social proximity to their research subject might be more or less close, depending on the contexts. While the reasons for the interest or disregard towards servants and domestic workers by different groups of scholars at different times deserve careful scrutiny, the dependency of many intellectuals on the work of their domestic staff may have prevented them (despite their closeness) from focusing on the history of such workers. For an analysis of scholarship on domestic service/work, see Raffaella Sarti, ‘Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work’, *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314, also published in Hoerder, van Nederveen Meerkerk, Neunsinger, *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, 25–60, with further references.

<sup>5</sup> Intervention of Carolyn Steedman at the second ‘Servants’ Past’ conference, Berlin, 11–13 April 2018.

and space, we have to multiply the translations from different languages. We must rely on secondary literature—that is, on the work of several colleagues, each of whom must have done such a translation exercise. Finally, to summarise the results of our studies, we must translate all the collected information into a single language, which at the moment is very often English—a choice that is not at all neutral, especially if we consider that the spread of English is linked to British and American imperialism. Such a spread certainly makes communication among an extremely wide number of speakers possible; yet, at the same time, it marginalises scholars who are not fluent in English: some of them may be able to afford to pay to have their texts translated, others may not; and this inevitably creates new forms of cultural imperialism.

In summary, there are multiple layers of translation, all implying a certain shift from the original meaning(s). In a sense, if we conceive the languages used by our ancestors as practical tools with peculiar meanings linked to (more or less limited) specific contexts, all of these translation activities put a strain on language. While today many of us are accustomed to being able to speak to people all over the world without too much incomprehension or misunderstanding, such a level of communication is one of the outcomes of the (certainly not irenic and painless) globalisation processes we are interested in. The languages of our sources were generally used and made sense in much less globalised and interconnected contexts, though with important differences depending on the cases.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, I do not think that the numerous problems I have mentioned—well known to historians—make writing a global history of domestic service impossible. Yet these problems and methodological implications need to be carefully addressed so as to avoid or, at least as far as possible, reduce, the multiple misunderstandings that all the necessary translations may imply.<sup>7</sup> To reach such a goal, the very meaning and history

<sup>6</sup> As noted by Francesca Trivellato, the understanding of cross-cultural encounters by people of the past ‘more often than not involved ... an ample dose of wishful thinking and miscommunication’. Francesca Trivellato, ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?’ *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The problem of language was already addressed in one of the first contributions advocating a comparative history, that is, Marc Bloch’s article ‘Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes’ [For a Comparative History of European Societies],

of the terms used in different contexts should be part of the historians' narratives, otherwise historians themselves might not be conscious of what they are 'really' talking about, especially (but not exclusively) when dealing with contexts they know only through secondary literature rather than through first-hand research. Using (in English) 'umbrella terms' such as 'servants' to deal with different historical and geographical contexts may create a misleading impression of uniformity, whereas similarities and differences between various cases are exactly what need to be analysed and understood.<sup>8</sup>

## DEFINITIONS OF SERVANTS

In historical sources, we find many different terms used to label and identify people whom we historians might include in our research agenda.<sup>9</sup> Trying to understand what each of them refers to in any specific context is therefore a first crucial step to make comparisons possible. Yet this is not enough: at least two further steps are necessary. First, we need some form of aggregation of a variety of definitions into a wider servant category. Wider categories are often present in our sources. For instance, this might be the case with documents referring to households and/or families where staff included people who performed different tasks and were therefore labelled with terms making their specialisations clear, such as cook, lackey and lady-in-waiting. Yet alongside terms that highlighted particular roles and

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*Revue de synthèse historique* [Historical Synthesis Review] 46, 1928, 47–50. Bloch suggested creating a common scientific language among historians.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to early modern France, Cissie Fairchilds defined the terms *domestique* and *serviteur* as 'umbrella terms', 'that covered people from a wide variety of social backgrounds, incomes and occupations'. Cissie Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies: Servants and Their Masters in Old Regime France* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 2–3. The English term 'servant' can also be considered an 'umbrella term'. On these issues, see Raffaella Sarti, 'Who are Servants? Defining Domestic Service in Western Europe (16th–21st Centuries)', in *Proceedings of the Servant Project*, ed. Suzy Pasleau and Isabelle Schopp, with Raffaella Sarti, 5 vols, vol. 2 (Liège: Éditions de l'Université de Liège, 2005 (but 2006)), 3–59.

<sup>9</sup> Some examples, from innumerable others, are provided by the words *davri* and *badaran* described in the chapters by Geetanjali Tyagi and Priyanka Khanna in this volume.

specialisations, in such documents more encompassing vocabulary is often also present. While on the one hand this might create some confusion, because the same man or woman may be defined by two (or more) different terms, on the other hand it offers historians the chance of knowing and maybe even using *emic* rather than *etic* categories, that is categories used by the humans of the past (sometimes even subaltern ones) they are studying.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in sources from upper-class Italian families, we may find listings of the wages paid to the whole *famiglia salariata* (literally 'waged family') or *servitù* (the whole staff) including people defined as *maestro di casa* (butler), *donna di governo* (female housekeeper), *cameriere* (valet), *cuoco* (male cook), *cuciniera* (female cook), *staffiere* (footman), and so on.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in other languages, in addition to rather narrow labels we find more generic ones, such as *domestiques* in French; *Gesinde*, *Dienstboten* (servants) in German; *criados* (servants) in Spanish; and 'servants' in English, to quote but some cases.

While the emic perspective is necessary to understand the past society that historians focus on, the etic one seems more or less inevitable if we want to compare different societies over time and space and if we aim to contribute to a global history of domestic service/work. In such a case, even the more general terms we find in our sources may not be enough or, on the contrary, may be too broad and may encompass too many situations. In many European languages, words used to define servants may/might, for instance, also indicate young, generally unmarried, people, such as 'maid' in English, to give just one example.<sup>12</sup> In French, the word *domestiques*, according to the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot and D'Alembert, referred to 'all those who are subordinate to someone, who make up his household, and who live or are supposed to live with him, as secretaries, chaplains, etc.' and sometimes it extended 'to his

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth L. Pike, 'Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior', in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, Kenneth L. Pike (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1967), 37–72.

<sup>11</sup> Raffaella Sarti, 'Per una storia del personale domestico in Italia. Il caso di Bologna (secc. XVIII–XIX)' [A History of Domestic Staff in Italy. The Case of Bologna (17th–19th Centuries)], Ph.D. diss., University of Turin, 1994, 1–105.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Mitterauer, 'Servants and Youth', *Continuity and Change* 5, no. 1, 1990, 11–38.



wife & to his children'.<sup>13</sup> In some Indian contexts, too, distinctions might be blurred, with an overlap in the conditions of wife, concubine, slave/servant and even prostitute.<sup>14</sup> Such tensions between distinction and conflation are certainly an area that deserves to be analysed in a comparative perspective, also because of the wider implications for the status of women in any particular society. The fact we may use the same term to refer to different situations—such as in the aforementioned case of 'maid' (female servant and young woman)—is certainly highly revealing and deserves careful attention, but it also requires effort by the historians focusing on servants to distinguish different cases despite the use of the same words in the sources, in order to include some cases in their database and to exclude others.

To sum up, in a sense we have to decide which aspects and groups from different societies to include in our research agenda, what to compare and what to encompass under the definition of servants and/or domestic service if we use English as a vehicular language (which often implies a further translation). The parallels drawn by travellers and scholars of the past may help us to link the emic and etic perspectives.<sup>15</sup> In turn,

<sup>13</sup> Denis Diderot and Jean Baptiste Le Rond D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* [Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts], vol. 5 (Paris: Briasson, David l'Aîné, Le Breton, Durand, 1755), entry *domestique* ('le mot *domestique* comprend toutes les personnes qui sont subordonnées à quelqu'un, qui composent sa maison, & qui vivent ou sont censées vivre avec lui, comme secrétaires, chapelains, &c. Quelquefois le mot *domestique* s'étend jusqu'à la femme & aux enfans' [*sic*]).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, the papers presented at the first 'Servants' Pasts' conference in New Delhi, 16–18 February 2017, by Ruchika Sharma, 'My Faithful Servant': Concubinage and Mixed-Race Households in Early Colonial Bengal' and by Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Caste, Religion and Servants' Representations in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India'. Also see the second section of the introduction to this volume. Discipleship, too, might imply overlapping with service and slavery; see the paper presented at the first 'Servants' Pasts' conference in New Delhi by Jessica Hinchy, 'Service, Discipleship and Slavery in the Nineteenth Century *hijra* Community'.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire, *De la domesticité chez les peuples anciens et modernes* [Domestic Staff among Ancient and Modern Peoples] (Paris: A. Egron, 1814); Raffaella Sarti, 'The Purgatory of Servants': (In)Subordination, Wages, Gender and Marital Status of Servants in England and Italy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 4, 2015, 347–72.

the 'artificial' category constructed by historians can be used as a tool to interrogate history. With this aim, I consider a broad and flexible category more useful but, depending on the research agenda, a narrow and rigid one might also sometimes turn out to be suitable.

Each of these steps is far from obvious and implies precise choices by historians who necessarily actively construct the servant category. Since different choices may bring about very different results, it is important to be conscious of this 'responsibility' and to make one's decisions clear, particularly because in many contexts the categories we find in the sources are far from clear cut, they are often blurred, ambiguous and have multiple meanings.<sup>16</sup> Whereas focusing on the issue of the servant's conflictual, controversial, ambiguous definition allows us to encompass a much wider range of problems—not to say the entire history of domestic service—the work of historians consists of not only registering, contextualising and 'understanding' the meaning of the definitions found in the sources, but also actively constructing the servants' category that he/she employs.

In summary, while historians pursuing a possible global history of domestic service must delve into the past and become conscious of the categories used by the people they are studying, to create their research agenda they must perform a kind of defining activity to decide what to include within and what to leave outside of such a possible global history. Even an approach that is very close to the sources, broad and/or inclusive implies some form of delimitation of the research field. To reach such a goal, historians must include different cases in their 'artificial' servant category, which implies finding and stressing commonalities in different situations. At the same time, they must pinpoint differences in a complex intermingling of emic and etic perspectives, not to mention the difficult task of enabling a fruitful interaction of different etic perspectives constructed by different scholars.

## SERVANTS' STATUS

'Not every form of serving is unbecoming and calamitous. When one says, that one serves the Prince, servitude must sometimes be considered as a

<sup>16</sup> Sarti, 'Who are Servants?'

great benefice from Heaven', wrote the Italian seventeenth-century author Pio Rossi.<sup>17</sup> From our contemporary perspective—that is the perspective of a world where equality and freedom are widely considered as the essential rights of all individuals, as stated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—we implicitly or explicitly tend to consider not only any form of slavery and servitude but also any form of service implying personal dependency as debasing and charged with negative connotations. Yet, in several past societies, some forms of service and even of slavery were not incompatible with high status. Nobles and other people of high status might serve and servants/slaves might be nobles and/or enjoy high status. Serving might even be a way to improve one's position thanks to the relationship with a powerful master.<sup>18</sup>

Looking at the issue more closely, we discover that domestic work is likely to be desirable today too.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, one could argue that contemporary domestic workers are different from the servants of the past. While there is no doubt that when writing a (global) history of domestic service/work a crucial issue is that of continuities and discontinuities between past servants and contemporary domestic workers, an interesting source for synchronic and diachronic comparisons can be found in the status of the people who, in different contexts, defined themselves and/or were defined by their contemporaries with terms that historians include in their servant

<sup>17</sup> Pio Rossi, *Convito Morale per gli Etici, Economici, e Politici Ordinato et intrecciato si della Ragion di Stato, come delle principali materie militari* [Moral Gathering for Ethics Philosophers, Economists, and Politicians Ordered and Inclusive of Both the Reason of State and the Main Military Subjects], 2 vols, vol. 2 (Venetia: Gueriglij, 1639–1657), 380–81. On literate servants and intellectuals in service, see, for instance, the section 'Cultural Services' in *Service and Servants in Early Modern Europe 1550–1750*, eds W. C. Carroll and Jeanne Clegg, special issue of the *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 4, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Sunil Kumar's Interjection in this volume as well as his article 'When Slaves were Nobles: The Shamsī Bandagān in the Early Delhi Sultanate', *Studies in History* 10, no. 1, 1994, 23–52.

<sup>19</sup> See the paper presented at the first 'Servants' Past's' conference in New Delhi by Shalini Grover, 'Liberalisation's Educated Female Domestic Workers: Transnational Employers, Social Mobility and Intersectionality in Postcolonial India'. See also her chapter 'Streamlining Paid Domestic Labour in Postcolonial India: The New Female "All-Rounder" in Master–Servant Expatriate Relationships', in *Servants' Past's: Late Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia*, ed. Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019) [forthcoming].

category. Analysing the status of servants/domestic workers implies focusing on the range of rights that these people enjoyed, according to the law and/or thanks to their capacity to negotiate their working and living conditions.<sup>20</sup>

## DOMESTIC SERVICE AS A BATTLEFIELD

Although service is not always negative, it is often considered so. To be more precise, it is increasingly perceived as debasing when freedom and equality become essential human rights.<sup>21</sup> In any case, if we assume as a minimal operational definition that the existence of a servant implies that of a master—that is, that the status of servant is not an absolute but a relative one, linked to a hierarchic relationship and to asymmetric power—we may consider the definition of some individuals as servants not as the attribution of a static label but, on the contrary, as the goal at stake in continuous negotiations and conflicts.<sup>22</sup> In other words, in a kind of Foucaultian perspective, the categories of servant and master may be seen as the battlefield of a microphysics of powers made of endless negotiations and daily struggles, both individual and collective.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in eighteenth-century Paris, according to Steven Kaplan, the *compagnons* (i.e., trained but not independent artisans) refused to be called *valets*, *laquais* (lackeys) and *domestiques* (domestic servants) as their employers/masters often called them.<sup>24</sup> And in nineteenth-century

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Raffaella Sarti, *Servo e padrone, o della (in)dipendenza. Un percorso da Aristotele ai nostri giorni* [Servant and Master, or on (In)dependence. A Journey from Aristotle to the Present], vol. 1, *Teorie e dibattiti* [Theories and Debates], *Quaderni di Scienza & Politica* [Science & Politics Notebooks], Quaderno no. 2 [Notebook no. 2] (Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna [University of Bologna, Nourishing Mother of Studies], 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); English translation, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> Steven Kaplan, 'La lutte pour le contrôle du marché du travail à Paris au XVIIIe siècle' [The Struggle for Control of the Labour Market in Paris in the 18th Century], *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* [Modern and Contemporary History Review] 36, no. 3, 1989, 399.

Sardinia, Italy, in the trials analysed by Monica Miscali, some employers defined as *servo* people who did not describe themselves as servants but rather as shepherds, workers, and so on.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, we may see the actual powers of the individuals involved in a master–servant relationship as the result of daily negotiations at all levels (even emotional, provided that emotions do not exclude either power or material interests, rather the contrary, and in some cases were/are in a sense prescribed).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, comparing the struggles around the attribution of the roles and statuses of masters and servants and their respective power/rights in different contexts is extremely interesting. Not surprisingly, in many different contexts, we find similar efforts to train prospective servants to their roles and to keep them ‘in their place’.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, some cases are especially telling, particularly because roles within households intermingle with roles in the wider society. For example, some 30 years ago, Karen Tranberg Hansen argued that ‘domestic service was very much a fixture of colonial society in Northern Rhodesia ... In domestic service, Africans were to become domesticated.’<sup>28</sup> While the crucial role of the house and of the (intimate) master–servant relationship in the development of colonial societies has been investigated at least since the publication of *Casa-Grande & Senzala* by Gilberto Freyre (1933),<sup>29</sup> in the latest decades postcolonial and new imperial studies have considered

<sup>25</sup> Monica Miscali, ‘Los criados y la tierra en la Cerdeña del siglo XIX’ [Servants and Land in 19th-Century Sardinia], *Historia Agraria* [Agrarian History] 15, no. 35, 2005, 35, and a personal communication.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, the chapters by Sajjad Alam Rizvi, Shivangini Tandon, Geetanjali Tyagi and Priyanka Khanna in this volume and by Satyasikha Chakraborty (‘From *Bibis* to *Ayahs*: Sexual Labour, Domestic Labour and the Moral Politics of Empire’) and Nitin Varma (‘The Many Lives of *Ayah*: Life Trajectories of Female Servants in Early Nineteenth-Century India’) in *Servants’ Pasts*, vol. 2.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, the chapter by Jana Tschurenne, ‘Training a Servant Class: Gender, Poverty and Domestic Labour’, in *Servants’ Pasts*, vol. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Distant Companions. Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900–1985* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 29–30.

<sup>29</sup> English translation: Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* [*Casa-Grande & Senzala*]: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization. Translated from the Portuguese by Samuel Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946) (other editions also exist).

‘the domestic and the intimate as sites of power in colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial projects’.<sup>30</sup>

While nouns and definitions, as well as struggles around them, are important, focusing on what people actually did and applying the verb-oriented method elaborated by Swedish scholars may help to find out different constellations of behaviours and to unveil negotiations and hierarchies beyond, or regardless of, labels.<sup>31</sup> This seems especially interesting when comparing cases from contexts with (apparently) more/less rigid norms. In such a perspective, the Indian caste system—which has precise norms about pollution—is particularly interesting compared to other systems that do not have such explicit norms but nonetheless do reveal anxieties and fears of some kind of ‘contamination’ by the servants leading to efforts to set clear distinctions.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the distinctions between masters and servants and also between different types of servants should be addressed. For instance, in India some servants were (and are) prevented from performing certain tasks which, because of their belonging to a certain caste, is considered polluting.<sup>33</sup> The transformation of the possible sources of pollution in any single context or in different contexts deserves careful analysis and offers further opportunities for comparison.

<sup>30</sup> Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie, ‘Introduction’, in *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 1. Especially interesting is Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> On the verb-oriented method, see Maria Ågren, ed., *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> See the chapter by Pankaj Jha in this volume and the third section of the Introduction.

<sup>33</sup> The implications of the castes were already highlighted by Grégoire, *De la domesticité chez les peuples anciens et modernes*, 76 (‘La domesticité est établie dans l’Inde, où, pour être bien servi, on préfère aux Européens, les gens du pays. On est obligé d’en avoir un grand nombre, parce que la division des castes ayant réparti les fonctions, chacun se borne à celles qui sont affectées à sa caste; si on lui demande plus, il répond: *ma caste le défend*.’ [Domestic service is established in India, where, to be well served, one prefers to Europeans, the people from the country. One is forced to have a large number of them, because as the division in castes has distributed the tasks, each one is limited to those which are assigned to his caste; if he is asked for more, he answers: my caste forbids it.]).

Moving from the fear of (cultural, moral, symbolic) contamination to that of contagion, a further area of analysis and comparison might be the medical and scientific discourses supporting such concerns, as was the case with early twentieth-century European doctors who presented domestics as people who spread tuberculosis in their masters' households,<sup>34</sup> and the late colonial Ayurvedic treatises that described low-caste Indian servants who frequented upper-caste/middle-class households as potential carriers of disease.<sup>35</sup>

Considering domestic service as a kind of battlefield implies seeing servants not as passive tools in the hands of their masters, according to a common stereotype in Western cultures dating back to Aristotle, but as individuals provided with at least some agency.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, looking more closely at the sources we discover several cases supporting such an interpretation.<sup>37</sup> To avoid prejudicial approaches which may turn into excessive victimisation of servants on one hand and too optimistic a view of servants' agency on the other, it is necessary to assess every single case. Individuals may range from having (almost) no agency to being able to negotiate their living and working conditions and even to radically change their contexts. The degree of isolation of the servant and/or the master can be important in determining the actual balance of power. As for servants, some might be considered 'socially dead' by wider society and/or could be highly isolated,<sup>38</sup> and this could dramatically (although

<sup>34</sup> For instance, Dr Fernand Barbary, *Semeurs de bacilles insoupçonnés. Domestiques en service et atteints de tuberculose à forme torpide. Mesures d'hygiène et de prophylaxie* [Sowers of Unsuspected Bacilli. Domestic Servants in Service and Suffering from Torpid Forms of Tuberculosis. Hygiene Measures and Prophylaxis] (Nice: J. Ventre, 1913).

<sup>35</sup> See the papers presented at the first 'Servants' Pasts' conference in New Delhi by Saurav Kumar Rai, 'Spreading the Disease: Late Colonial Ayurvedic Discourse on Servants', and Sharmita Ray, 'The Polluting Presence at Birth: Analyzing Midwifery in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal'.

<sup>36</sup> On servants' agency, see Lucy Delap's chapter, 'Agency and Domestic Workers' in *Servants' Pasts*, vol. 2, and Sarti, 'Servo e padrone', 29–88.

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, the case of Kali described by Uma Chakravarti in her Interjection in this volume or the testimonies in divorce trials analysed by Nitin Varma in 'The Many Lives of *Ayah*'.

<sup>38</sup> The notion of 'social death' (as used by Orlando Patterson when referring to slavery: *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard

not necessarily) limit their agency.<sup>39</sup> Yet, in other cases, servants were embedded in communities that provided them with help, solidarity and some form of empowerment.<sup>40</sup>

The brotherhood of St. Vitale, an early-modern Italian brotherhood of servants very well integrated into the local urban landscape of the city of Bologna, provided a definition of 'proper servants' to solve controversies about who had the right to be a member of the association, and this definition was a surprising one because it included upper servants and excluded many lower servants who today would be considered servants par excellence.<sup>41</sup> This is a good example of the fact that the representation of the most despised servant may not only be different in different societies and change over time, but can also vary within any single society.<sup>42</sup> In point of fact, trying to analyse domestic service not only through the master's eyes but also through those of the servants themselves is of crucial importance in order to understand the dynamic of the master-servant relationship in any context.<sup>43</sup> Sources are often heavily biased, being mainly produced by the masters. Nonetheless, (clues of) the servants' voices and thoughts have survived: even though 'listening' to such voices and recovering such

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University Press, 1985]) is rather controversial, since in a sense almost nobody (not even a slave) is completely socially dead, yet in other senses it may be useful to illustrate processes of extreme marginalisation (not necessarily linked only to slavery).

<sup>39</sup> 'Her situatedness outside of an organized group does not imply her loss of agency,' argues Swapna Banerjee, referring to Baby Halder, the Indian domestic worker who became an acclaimed author after the publication of her autobiography, *Aalo Aandhari* (*A Life Less Ordinary*; Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2006); see Swapna Banerjee, 'Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*: A Transition from India's Colonial Past?' in *Colonization and Domestic Service*, 244.

<sup>40</sup> See the case of the caste assembly resisting the removal of the corpse of Jairam, illustrated in Lakshmi Subramanian's chapter in this volume.

<sup>41</sup> Raffaella Sarti, 'The True Servant. Self-definition of Male Domestics in an Italian City (Bologna, 17th–19th Centuries)', *The History of the Family* 10, no. 4, 2005, 407–33.

<sup>42</sup> An example is represented by the case of the story of the sweeper Sabiya described by Prabhat Kumar in his chapter, 'Representing Servant Lives in the Household and Beyond', in *Servants' Pasts*, vol. 2.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, Nitin Sinha's chapter in this volume, and Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).



thoughts might cause huge methodological problems, some servants of the past can sometimes speak.

## WHICH COMPARISON?

To move towards a global history of domestic service, I suggest we compare cases from different historical, geographical, social and cultural contexts. Certainly 'writing global history does not necessarily entail taking the whole globe as the framework of analysis.'<sup>44</sup> At the same time, 'static' and synchronic comparisons between different cases, though enriching, may not only be insufficient but also entail shortcomings and a risk of misunderstanding. Some problems are linked to the very fact that such a comparison often takes existing boundaries (the most typical ones being national borders) for granted. As early as 1928, Marc Bloch made clear that national borders are human artefacts that change over time and are not necessarily relevant in comparisons, also distinguishing comparisons between static (and possibly unrelated) cases from comparisons focusing on influences and genealogies.<sup>45</sup> Today several global historians and scholars who propose (relatively) new approaches such as entangled history,<sup>46</sup> *histoire croisée*<sup>47</sup> and connected history<sup>48</sup> are similarly unhappy with narratives trapped into national boundaries and stress the need to address 'zones of interaction between diverse societies'<sup>49</sup> as well as influences and connections between different contexts.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz and Peer Vries, 'Editorial', *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 1, 2006, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes'.

<sup>46</sup> Eliga H. Gould, 'Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery', *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 3, 2007, 764–86.

<sup>47</sup> Sönke Bauck and Thomas Maier, 'Entangled History', *InterAmerican Wiki: Terms—Concepts—Critical Perspectives*, 2015. Available at [www.uni-bielefeld.de/cias/wiki/e\\_Entangled\\_History.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/cias/wiki/e_Entangled_History.html) (accessed on 31 March 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3, 1997, 735–62.

<sup>49</sup> Clarence-Smith, Pomeranz and Vries, 'Editorial', 2.

<sup>50</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *Globalgeschichte: Eine Einführung* [Global History: An Introduction] (München: Beck, 2013).

Even though global history does not necessarily coincide with the history of globalisation,<sup>51</sup> processes of globalisation are often at its very core.<sup>52</sup> The slave trade, according to several scholars, has played a crucial role in connecting different continents, thus fostering globalisation. In 2016, Damian Alan Pargas wrote in the editorial of the first issue of the *Journal of Global Slavery* that 'despite its indisputable centrality to the histories and legacies of particular parts of the world, slavery must be understood as a *global* and a *globalizing* phenomenon in world history ... Slavery can be considered a *globalizing* force because it by definition connected continents through warfare, power relationships, trade networks, and cultural exchange.'<sup>53</sup>

Is it possible to argue the same about domestic service? In fact, there is some overlap between slavery and domestic service inasmuch as some enslaved people served as domestics. However, the globalisation of domestic service is often presented as a different and very recent phenomenon. While overlap and differences between slaves' and servants' (more or less forced) flows are an interesting issue to analyse, in a previous study I have shown that, contrary to what is often assumed, the globalisation of domestic service has deep roots in history and also contributed in a crucial way to Western colonialism and imperialism, especially thanks to the migration of people employed in the colonies as

<sup>51</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Peter N. Stearns, *Globalization in World History*, 2nd edn (New York–Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Conrad, *Globalgeschichte*; Clarence-Smith, Pomeranz and Vries, 'Editorial', 2.

<sup>53</sup> Damian Alan Pargas, 'Slavery as a Global and Globalizing Phenomenon: An Editorial Note', *Journal of Global Slavery* 1, no. 1, 2016, 1 (emphasis in original). These features of slavery had also been stressed by earlier scholars; see Patrick Manning, ed., *Slave Trades, 1500–1800: Globalization of Forced Labour* (Hampshire: Variorum, 1996). According to Manning, 'The accumulated volumes of studies in slavery combine to reflect a major advance in the practice of comparative history'; see Patrick Manning, 'Legacies of Slavery: Comparisons of Labour and Culture', in *Legacies of Slavery: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Maria Suzette Fernandes Dias (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 16–34. For a recent discussion of these issues, see Paulin Ismard, 'Écrire l'histoire de l'esclavage. Entre approche globale et perspective comparatiste' [Writing the History of Slavery. Between Global Approach and a Comparative Perspective], *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* [Annals. History, Social Sciences] 72, no. 2, 2017, 7–43.

servants and charged with the partially paradoxical tasks of exporting, as servants, the coloniser's culture and values to the colonised countries.<sup>54</sup> Even though I have highlighted the contribution of servants' migration to Western colonisation and imperialism, I align myself with those scholars who struggle to avoid making globalisation coincide with Westernisation. While Western colonisation played a crucial role in fostering globalisation, in my view the latter is a much larger and multi-central phenomenon, and only adopting such a perspective will make it possible to escape the criticism of those scholars who consider the very concept of globalisation as misleading.<sup>55</sup>

But let us go back to colonisation and domestic service. Interest in several aspects is growing, particularly in the relationships between white masters and indigenous servants in the colonies as well as in the legacies of colonisation.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, as B.W. Higman put it, 'it can be asked how far contemporary patterns of domestic service incorporate continuities from colonization that derive from deeply rooted hierarchies of wealth and inequality, and how far these patterns depend on recent social and economic change unrelated to the processes of formal colonization that dominated earlier periods'. Comparing International Labour Organization (ILO) data on 116 countries around 2010, he found that 'states derived from former colonies and former colonial powers have roughly twice as many domestic workers per capita as states that were not part of the formal imperial project'. Among former colonies, those which were slave societies based on plantations today have the largest percentage of domestic workers, Latin America and the Caribbean being the areas with the highest percentage of domestic workers in the population. Though highlighting the legacies of colonisation, Higman argued that formal colonisation is not essential to the existence of a large population of domestic workers in contemporary

<sup>54</sup> Raffaella Sarti, 'The Globalisation of Domestic Service—An Historical Perspective', in *Migration and Domestic Work: A European Perspective on a Global Theme*, ed. Helma Lutz (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 77–98.

<sup>55</sup> Frederick Cooper, 'What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs* 100, no. 399, 2001, 189–213.

<sup>56</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; Haskins and Lowrie, *Colonization and Domestic Service*; Claire Lowrie, *Masters and Servants: Cultures of Empire in the Tropics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

societies. It would be misleading, for instance, to link the large domestic worker population in the oil states of the Middle East to colonisation.<sup>57</sup>

## NUMBER AND GENDER

The number and gender composition of people considered as servants/domestic workers by the wider society where they live and/or by historians and social scientists is obviously a crucial issue. Factors affecting number and gender composition may be different. Today, the legacy of colonisation and plantation slavery mentioned by Higman is one of these factors, but certainly not the only one, as mentioned in the previous section.

In her outstanding 1970 book on women's role in economic development, Ester Boserup interpreted the relative number of domestic workers among the working population and the level of feminisation of domestic work as a proxy for modernisation and economic development, arguing that in countries in the initial phases of economic development, domestic tasks are mainly performed by family members, whereas, during the intermediate stages, the personal services sector is very large. In her view, urbanisation creates a demand for service personnel in bars and restaurants as well as in the homes of the newly rich entrepreneurial class. At the beginning, this expansion involves both men and women, but later the sector becomes more feminised. However, in fully industrialised countries, many service tasks are no longer performed at home and the number of domestic workers is low.<sup>58</sup> Such an elegant model has been criticised by several scholars.

Having been collecting comparative data on the number and gender of servants/domestic workers in several countries (particularly in the West) for more than 30 years, I have noticed that in many locations there was a peak in the percentage of servants/domestic workers among the economically active population around the 1880s, while in the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth centuries there was a growing

<sup>57</sup> B. W. Higman, 'An Historical Perspective. Colonial Continuities in the Global Geography of Domestic Service', in *Colonization and Domestic Service*, 19, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), 103–04.

feminisation of domestic staff in many different contexts.<sup>59</sup> Such trends seem to confirm Boserup's hypothesis, as does, for instance, the fact that in India, too, a growing feminisation of domestic staff has been detected since the 1930s.<sup>60</sup> Yet things are actually more complex than that. My long-term research on Europe, encompassing more than five centuries (fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries), shows that domestic service did not experience a straightforward, progressive feminisation; rather, its gender composition fluctuated significantly over time and is still fluctuating.<sup>61</sup> In fact, according to the estimates of the number of domestic workers by the ILO, which (though admittedly challenging, as explained by the survey's authors themselves) represent an important effort to create a worldwide database, between 1995 and 2010 there was a 're-masculinisation' of domestic work at a global level. With the exclusion of China—the data for which is especially problematic—the incidence of women among domestic

<sup>59</sup> Raffaella Sarti, 'Conclusion. Domestic Service and European Identity', in *Proceedings of the Servant Project*, vol. 5, 195–284, appendix; Raffaella Sarti, 'Domestic Service: Past and Present in Southern and Northern Europe', *Gender and History* 18, no. 2, 2006, 222–45.

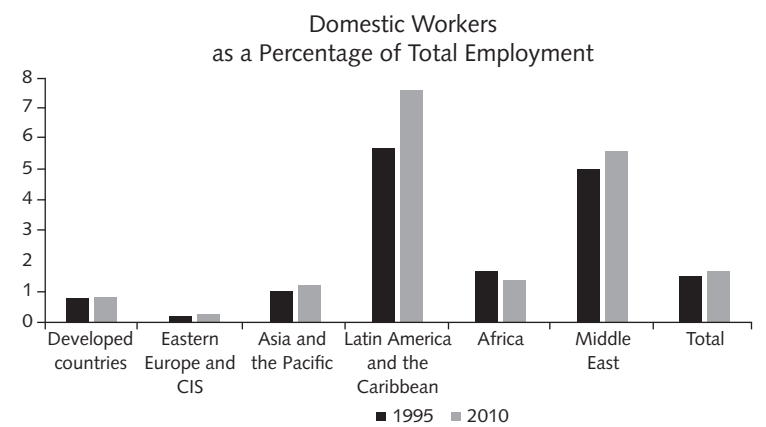
<sup>60</sup> Raka Ray, 'Masculinity, Femininity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century', *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3, 2000, 691–718; Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Swapna Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Banerjee, 'Baby Halder's A Life Less Ordinary', 240–41.

<sup>61</sup> Raffaella Sarti, 'Notes on the Feminization of Domestic Service: Bologna as a Case Study (18th–19th Centuries)', in *Le phénomène de la domesticité en Europe, XVIe–XXe siècles* [The Phenomenon of Domestic Service in Europe, 16th–20th Centuries] (*Acta Demographica* [Demographic Proceedings], XIII, Praha, 1997), eds Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and Ludmila Fialová (Praha: Česká Demografická Sociologický Ústav AV ČR [Czech Demographic Sociological Institute AV ČR], 1997), 125–63; Sarti, 'Domestic Service', 228; Raffaella Sarti and Francesca Scrinzi eds, *Men in a Woman's Job: Male Domestic Workers, International Migration and the Globalization of Care*, special issue of *Men and Masculinities* 13, no. 1, 2010; Majella Kilkey, Diane Perrons and Ania Plomien, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Work: Masculinities, Male Labour and Fathering in the UK and US* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Rhacel Parreñas, *Servant of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, 2nd edn (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 159–82; Ester Gallo and Francesca Scrinzi, *Migration, Masculinities and Reproductive Labour: Men of the Home* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

workers in fact diminished from 82.8 per cent to 81.5 per cent (Table I3.2). The percentage of men increased everywhere except in Asia and the Pacific (without China), where it remained the same, and in Eastern Europe and CIS, where it diminished (Table I3.2).

TABLE I3.1: Global and Regional Estimates of the Number of Domestic Workers in 1995 and 2010, Both Sexes and by Sex

PANEL A. BOTH SEXES				
	<i>Number of domestic workers</i>		<i>Domestic workers as a percentage of total employment</i>	
	1995	2010	1995	2010
Developed countries	3,245,000	3,555,000	0.8	0.8
Eastern Europe and CIS	477,000	595,000	0.2	0.3
Asia and the Pacific (including China)	13,826,000	21,467,000	1.0	1.2
Latin America and Caribbean	10,402,000	19,593,000	5.7	7.6
Africa	4,178,000	5,236,000	1.7	1.4
Middle East	1,101,000	2,107,000	5.0	5.6
Total (including China)	33,229,000	52,553,000	1.5	1.7

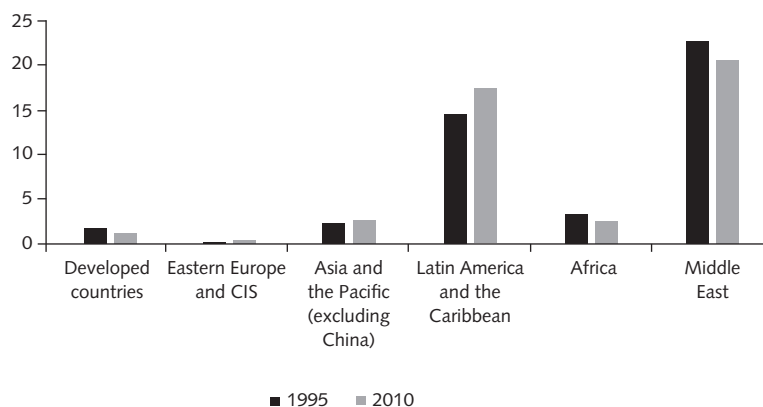


(contd)

(Table I3.1 continued)

PANEL B. FEMALES				
	<i>Female domestic workers</i>		<i>Female domestic workers as a percentage of total female employment</i>	
	1995	2010	1995	2010
Developed countries	2,868,000	2,597,000	1.7	1.3
Eastern Europe and CIS	289,000	396,000	0.3	0.4
Asia and the Pacific (excluding China)	5,305,000	9,013,000	2.3	2.6
Latin America and Caribbean	9,623,000	18,005,000	14.6	17.4
Africa	3,121,000	3,835,000	3.3	2.5
Middle East	745,000	1,329,000	22.6	20.5

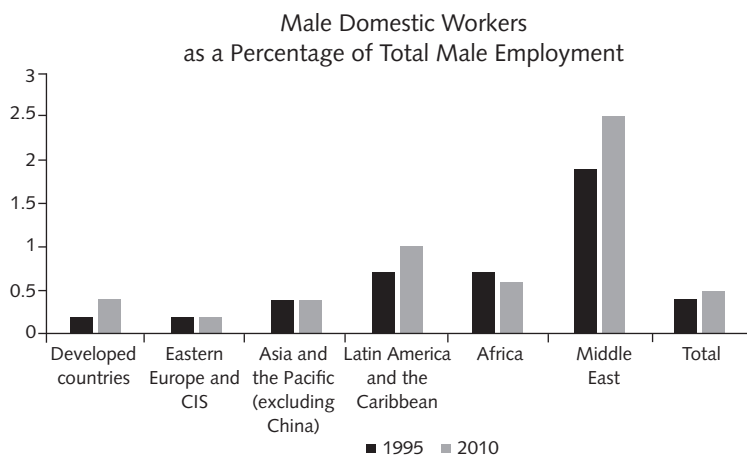
Female Domestic Workers  
as a Percentage of Total Female Employment



(contd)

(Table I3.1 continued)

PANEL C. MALES				
	<i>Male domestic workers</i>		<i>Male domestic workers as a percentage of total male employment</i>	
	1995	2010	1995	2010
Developed countries	377,000	958,000	0.2	0.4
Eastern Europe and CIS	188,000	199,000	0.2	0.2
Asia and the Pacific (excluding China)	1,811,000	3,064,000	0.4	0.5
Latin America and Caribbean	779,000	1,588,000	0.7	1.0
Africa	1,057,000	1,400,000	0.7	0.6
Middle East	356,000	778,000	1.9	2.5



Source: International Labour Organization (ILO), *Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection* (Geneva: ILO, 2013), 25. Data by sex including China for 1995 are inconsistent and as a consequence have not been considered. I am grateful to the principal author of the ILO volume, Malte Lübker, for confirming my suspicions that there are inconsistencies in the data by sex including China presented in the original Table 3.3, p. 25.

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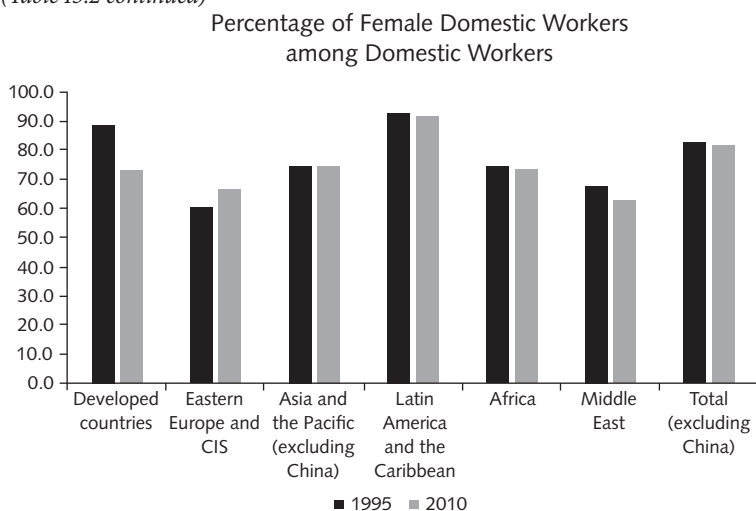


TABLE 13.2: Global and Regional Estimates of the Number of Domestic Workers in 1995 and 2010, by Sex and Percentage of Female Domestic Workers among Domestic Workers

<i>1995</i>	<i>Female domestic workers (b)</i>	<i>Male domestic workers (c)</i>	<i>Total (d)</i>	<i>% of female domestic workers among domestic workers</i>
Developed countries	2,868,000	377,000	3,245,000	88.38
Eastern Europe and CIS	289,000	188,000	477,000	60.59
Asia and the Pacific (excluding China)	5,305,000	1,811,000	7,116,000	74.55
Latin America and Caribbean	9,623,000	779,000	10,402,000	92.51
Africa	3,121,000	1,057,000	4,178,000	74.7
Middle East	745,000	356,000	1,101,000	67.67
Total (excluding China)	21,951,000	4,568,000	26,519,000	82.77
<i>2010</i>	<i>Female domestic workers (b)</i>	<i>Male domestic workers (c)</i>	<i>Total (d)</i>	<i>% of female domestic workers among domestic workers</i>
Developed countries	2,597,000	958,000	3,555,000	73.05
Eastern Europe and CIS	396,000	199,000	595,000	66.55
Asia and the Pacific (excluding China)	9,013,000	3,064,000	12,077,000	74.63
Latin America and Caribbean	18,005,000	1,588,000	19,593,000	91.90
Africa	3,835,000	1,400,000	5,235,000	73.26
Middle East	1,329,000	778,000	2,107,000	63.08
Total (excluding China)	35,175,000	7,987,000	43,162,000	81.5

(contd)

(Table I3.2 continued)



Source: My elaboration on data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), *Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection* (Geneva: ILO, 2013), 25. For the exclusion of data by sex about China, see Table I3.1.

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[http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_173363.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_173363.pdf)

In fact, like the gender composition, the number of servants/domestic workers fluctuated over time; in several countries after the First World War there was a growth.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, while after the Second World War many contexts witnessed a decrease in domestic worker numbers to the point that some scholars believed that they were disappearing, since the 1980s and 1990s a chorus of scholars has pointed at the ‘resurgence’ of paid domestic work.<sup>63</sup>

According to the worldwide estimates of the ILO, between 1995 and 2010 the total number of domestic workers dramatically increased from about 33 million to almost 53 million and their percentage of total employment increased as well, from 1.5 per cent to 1.7 per cent. While

<sup>62</sup> Sarti, ‘Domestic Service.’

<sup>63</sup> See Sarti, ‘Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers’, with further references.

the total number of domestic workers increased in all the macro-regions considered by the authors, things differed in their percentage of total employment. In Africa it decreased from 1.7 per cent to 1.4 per cent; in the 'developed' countries it remained unchanged and rather low (0.8 per cent);<sup>64</sup> in Eastern Europe's former socialist countries, where it used to be very low, it grew slightly from 0.2 per cent to 0.3 per cent; in Asia and the Pacific countries (except the 'developed' ones, included in the first group) it went from 1 per cent to 1.2 per cent; in the Middle East it increased from 5 per cent to 5.6 per cent; and in Latin America and the Caribbean it jumped from 5.7 per cent to 7.6 per cent (Table I3.1). According to such data, there are enormous differences in the number and percentage of domestic workers in different contexts. Using Boserup's interpretive framework, such differences should reveal different stages of economic development, which in part may be the case. Yet Boserup's hypothesis does not explain differences, for instance, among 'developed' and East European and CIS countries. Furthermore, how can we explain the recent expansion of paid domestic work and its 're-masculinisation' by applying her model? Should we conclude that the modernisation projects (implying growing gross domestic product, democracy, equality, welfare) have failed and are over? This may be so.

However, Merita Jokela, using the same ILO data and focusing on 74 countries, found that income inequality is the crucial factor in determining the proportion of domestic workers in the labour force. Such a result does not contradict the findings about the heritage of colonisation and slavery as such heritage often implies high inequality. At the same time, Jokela has found that a high prevalence of paid domestic work is associated with a high proportion of migrants in the labour force.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> It includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA; see International Labour Organization (ILO), *Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection* (Geneva: ILO, 2013), Appendix 1, 109.

<sup>65</sup> Merita Jokela, 'Macro-Level Determinants of Paid Domestic Labour Prevalence: A Cross-National Analysis of Seventy-Four Countries', *Social Policy and Society* 14, no. 3, 2015, 385–405.

## MOBILITY, MIGRATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

Domestic service/work generally entails some kind of mobility of servants/domestic workers from their own or familial households to those of their masters/employers to work (and often also live) there. This tends to make moving from one place to another—a ‘trespassing’ of borders, barriers and thresholds—a common feature of people who can be classified as servants/domestic workers: in a sense, these people create disorder (and this also by way of moving more or less freely in and out of the household where they worked).<sup>66</sup>

The very mobility of servants, be it free or forced, seems to be, if investigated in a comparative perspective, one of the reasons that made/makes creating barriers ‘necessary’ for masters/employers to keep their own status. Yet having a servant/domestic worker, as mentioned above, was/is almost impossible without some kind of ‘trespassing’. In colonial contexts where masters, too, moved from place to place, creating a new order was probably particularly necessary on the one hand, and particularly difficult on the other. This intimate link with displacement is probably one of the reasons why it is so difficult to clearly define servants, which brings us again to the initial issue of vocabulary and definition.

While servants/domestic workers’ mobility was/is often linked to inequality—as shown by analysis of the ILO data—and implied/implies entering a household to serve a master or to work in a subordinate position for an employer, in certain cases it may be an opportunity for freedom and independence.<sup>67</sup> Today, moving out to work as domestics may sometimes offer some chances of improvement even though only 10 per cent of domestic workers worldwide are estimated to be covered by general labour laws to the same extent as other workers and probably as much as 30 per cent are excluded from the scope of the country’s

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, the chapter by Simon Rastén in this volume.

<sup>67</sup> Camille Buat in her paper, ‘Labour Market Segmentation, Circulation and the Representation of Work: Exploring the Concept of *Naukri* in the *Bidesiya* Tradition’, presented at the first ‘Servants’ Pasts’ conference in New Delhi, shows that this could be one of the perceived features of moving out to earn, even though *naukari* (service) by the 1930s was increasingly associated with debasing service and dependency.

labour laws—a situation that leaves much room for old and new forms of personal dependency.<sup>68</sup>

The global mobilisation of domestic workers to obtain more rights—which in 2011 brought about the approval of the ILO's convention 189 on 'decent work' for domestic workers and led to the foundation of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)—has created a global network that acts as a kind of framework for analysis, both for research on the present and for future global histories of domestic workers.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, even among people affiliated to the IDWF there has been a discussion about words and appropriate translations, in particular because Latin Americans do not like the definition of 'domestic workers'. In fact, they associate 'domestic' with domestic animals and domestication. They prefer definitions such as *trabajadoras del hogar* (domestic workers; literally, household workers).<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the very existence of a network of people who identify themselves as workers doing the same job creates a framework for comparison, offering scholars a kind of ready-made subject of research where, in a sense, emic and etic perspectives coincide. On the other hand, such a new reality prompts us to investigate the forerunners of today's protagonists, boosting the need for a global history of domestic workers. Yet, as shown in this essay, writing such history will not be without challenges, and historians will have much work to do.

<sup>68</sup> ILO, *Domestic Workers Across the World*, 51.

<sup>69</sup> *Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers*, available at: [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:2551460](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460) (accessed on 30 March 2018); Eileen Boris and Jennifer N. Fish, "Slaves No More": Making Global Labor Standards for Domestic Workers, *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2, 2014, 411–43. On the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), see the website <http://archive.idwfed.org/>. Eileen Boris and Jennifer N. Fish, 'Domestic Workers Go Global: The Birth of the International Domestic Workers Federation', *New Labor Forum* 23, no. 3, 2014, 76–81.

<sup>70</sup> Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger and Dirk Hoerder, 'Domestic Workers of the World: Histories of Domestic Work as Global Labor History', in *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, 4.

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